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Though it was announced unofficially seven years ago, and despite the fact that we've just spent time in the company of an all-scowling, all-blasting demo of the game, we still don't know *precisely* when *Max Payne 3* will be released. Its production may not be as protracted as *Duke Nukem Forever*'s (14 years in development, with a further month's delay added recently for good measure), but it's clear that Max Payne's third chapter isn't something Rockstar is taking lightly.

But then Rockstar doesn't take anything lightly. Its president, Sam Houser, has an unusual relationship with the company's roster of games in that, unlike most execs, he isn't consumed with fulfilling quotas and hitting 'release windows' but by ensuring that the company is producing work it can believe in, be proud of, and – most importantly, according to Houser – which fans of Rockstar's games will enjoy. For a company of this scale, during a difficult period for the world of videogame production as a whole, it's quite an ideology. On the one hand, you wonder how it sits with some of the many shareholders in parent company Take Two; on the other, it's precisely this ethos that has underpinned Rockstar's considerable successes to date, so how could it be any different?

Like most great videogame companies, Rockstar invests in technology, hence its endorsement of the remarkable facial animation system of *LA Noire* (see p40), and the further exploration of the game-changing Euphoria animation in *Max Payne 3*, but it's the company's attitude to creative content that also helps to set it apart. The level of research, along with a dedication to telling Payne's tale in dynamic, unexpected ways, mark this new episode as an authentic Rockstar production.

Our feature on p50 looks into the *Max Payne 3* story in more detail, and gives some insight into why the man himself wasn't in the jolliest of moods when captured for this issue's cover. If, afterwards, you need some clouds with happy faces, we have them too (p44).





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Printed in the UK by William Gibbons.
Covers printed by Grange, Brighton, East Sussex.
Distributed in the UK by Seymour Distribution Ltd
2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT.
(0207 429 4000)

"Archimedes was on his own in the bath."



Total average
Net Circulation
28,051
January–December 2010

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Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR).

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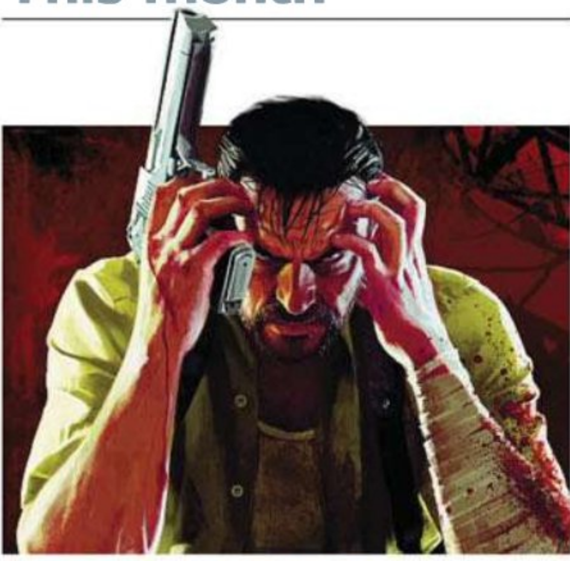
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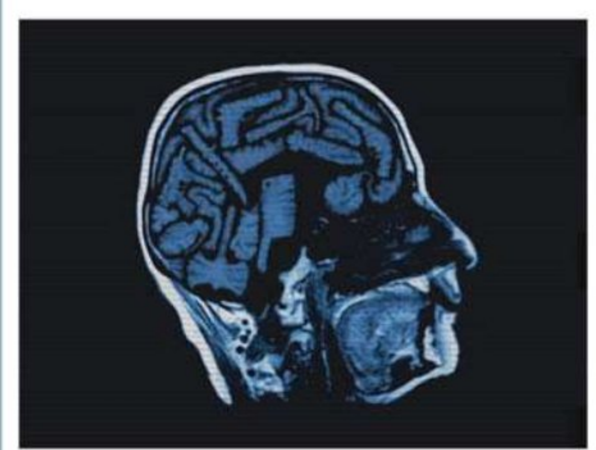
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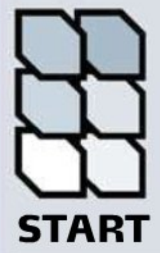


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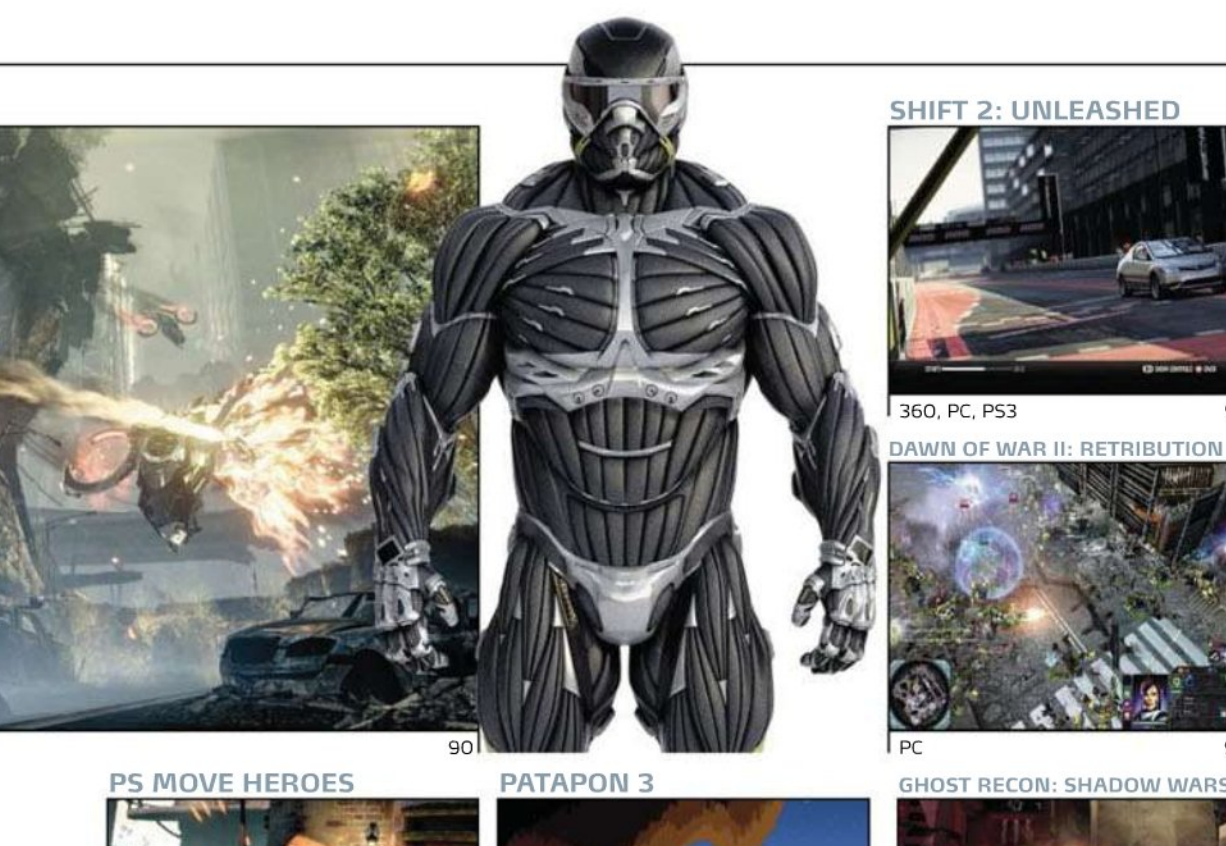




START








START



HARDWARE

The trouble with 3D

Nintendo, Sony and the movie industry say 3D is the future – and we've seen something that suggests it still is – but is the industry pushing a problematic and potentially obsolete technology instead?

It's surely self-evident that headaches and nausea shouldn't be in a trade-off with entertainment. Yet, with stereoscopic 3D – which is the technology underpinning the primary forms of 3D currently on the market, both in cinemas and at home – these problems are reported by a sizable minority. It has nothing to do with wearing glasses, either – it's a fundamental issue with the way that stereoscopic 3D works, and it affects you at a physiological level, regardless of whether you're staring through active shutter specs, polarised lenses, or looking at the polarised screen of the 3DS.

All of these display solutions use a process which projects two images, one for each eye, in order to create an illusion of depth. The problem arises because this forces your optical systems to contradict each other. When you look at an object in the real world, there are two processes at work: first, your eyes angle inwards to fix upon the object. Pull the object close enough, and you go cross-eyed. Look at something on the horizon, and your eyes are almost parallel. This is the primary way we judge depth, and the process that stereoscopic 3D hijacks to create its illusion. But there's another process at work, too: inside each eye, your lenses try to bring the object into focus, stretching thin to accommodate distance vision and bulging to resolve objects up close.

"What happens with stereoscopic 3D is you get provided two 2D images, one for the left eye, one for the right," says **Hagen Stolle**, CTO and business director of SeeReal, a Dresden-based company which has a long history in 3D display technology. "You have what's called parallax in the images – a subtle difference in the angle of the object presented in the two images that mimics the different angles from which your eyes would view an actual object. When combined in your brain, this gives an impression that the virtual object is somewhere behind the screen. But these are still 2D images – and they are, in reality, being depicted on the screen and that's where your eye is focused."

"So your eyes get cheated into converging on the virtual object [behind the display], but your focus isn't cheated and stays glued to the display," continues **Bo Krøll**, SeeReal's chairman. "The greater the depth of the 3D, the greater disparity between the focus and convergence of your eyes. Half your brain says the object is here, the other half says no, no, no – it's here!"

This conflict results, at the least, in the faint awareness of the image's artificiality, and at worst in eye fatigue, headaches and nausea. Over the long term, the effects are unknown – advocates of stereoscopic 3D insist that we will simply adapt, but it is telling that Nintendo's 3DS comes with a warning stating that is not suitable for young children whose eyes are still developing.

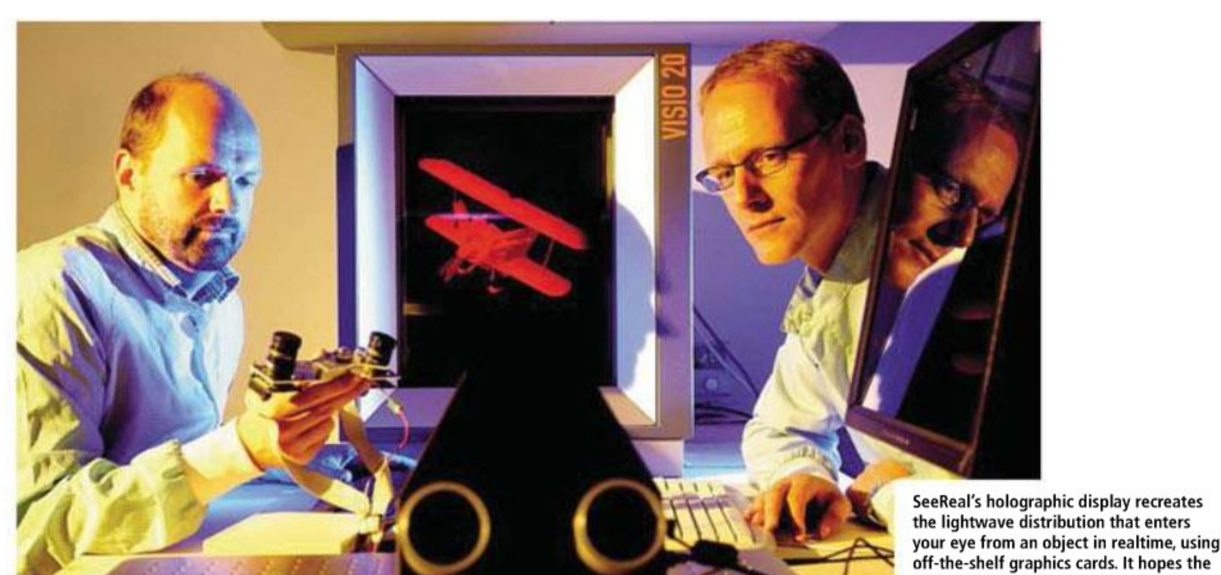
"The greater the depth of the 3D, the greater disparity between the focus and convergence of your eyes. Half your brain says the object is here, the other half says no, it's here!"

Not everyone suffers, of course, but even when someone is able to view stereoscopic 3D in perfect comfort, the technology's capabilities are still limited by the convergence-focus contradiction. In order to reduce the eye fatigue inherent to viewing stereoscopic 3D, creators implement a depth budget. This means that the full depth of a 3D scene is compressed down to a small number of inches – at this limited range of depths, the conflict between where your eyes are focused and where they are angled is less pronounced (this is also why some viewers find 3DS screens less straining when the 3D effect slider is pulled down). The result is that stereoscopic 3D often produces an image that looks like layers of 2D cutouts – the fulsome 3D of each object having been squished to a plane. And the closer the display to your face, the smaller the depth budget.

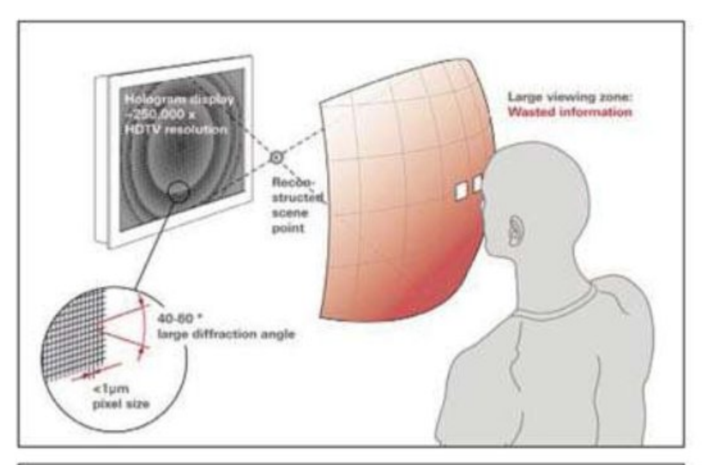
"That budget totals, on average, four per cent of the distance between the viewer and the display," says Krøll. "In practical terms, on average, that means [stereoscopic TVs] show little more than four inches of depth."

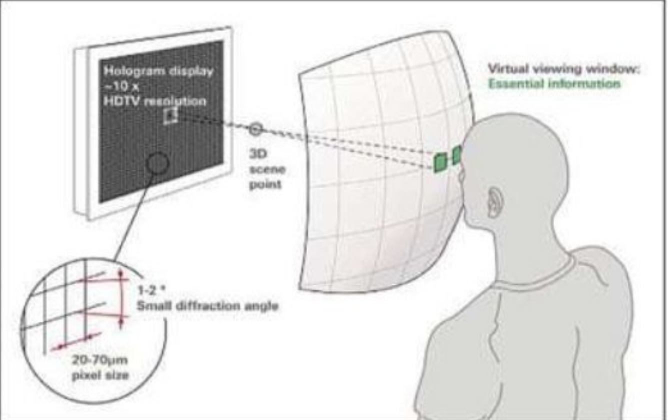
Nintendo's hardware, by this calculation, produces comfortable 3D at around a centimetre of depth. And this is only the main problem with stereoscopic 3D. There are other secondary issues too – already much discussed by detractors of 3D cinema. Famed cinematographer Walter Murch has described an unpleasant strobing effect related to horizontal movement and edge perception, and decries the overall dimness of the display when using polarised glasses. The entertainment world has worked hard to evangelise 3D, but the result seems to have been a heavy push for a technology which doesn't reproduce anything approaching the depth of reality, and is in some way incompatible with our optical systems.

Technologies exist which solve the major issues inherent to the current process, but it remains to be seen if the industry can afford to adopt them now that it has expended so many resources on promoting stereoscopic 3D. SeeReal's sudden willingness to articulate the failings of



SeeReal's holographic display recreates the lightwave distribution that enters your eye from an object in realtime, using off-the-shelf graphics cards. It hopes the first models will be on sale next year





This diagram shows the leap that makes holography possible: with eyetracking, SeeReal is able to limit its calculations to the light which enters your eyes, discarding unseen data

stereoscopic 3D isn't coincidental – it has something better. Holographic 3D technology produces a true 3D image, one which your eyes focus and converge upon in unison. It offers far greater depth, creating image-objects that appear to sit before your very nose, or disappear into the horizon.

"When you look at an object in reality, you're not actually seeing the object but the light reflected from the surface of the object," explains Stolle. "If I can recreate that same information – that same lightwave distribution that the real environment creates in your eyes – you could not tell the difference between the real object or the holographically reconstructed object. And since I know where the display is, and I know where you are – because we have a camera tracking your eyes – I can compute the lightwave distribution in your eye. I can then have a display which modulates the light in a particular way, called an interference pattern, so that when it hits your eye it has the same information as the natural 3D scene we wish to reconstruct. It's physics."

"We'll end up going back to some of the more traditional techniques like you would see with film noir, where you use light and shadow to draw your attention to things"

Though extremely clever, this has not been the main technological hurdle. "Holography has been around for 60 or 65 years, but has always been based on high-resolution emulsion films," says Stolle. "It requires a very high-resolution medium – on film it's easy, but on a display, to create a decent angle, I would need pixels of less than one micron in size! Which means I'd end up with more than 250,000 times HD resolution if I wanted to follow the classic approach to holography – which is why nobody has bothered! I'd have to compute every single one of those pixels at 60 frames a second. Nobody had a solution to do this practically. But if you look at the information this [imaginary super display] is creating, a lot of it is stuff you won't see. The only stuff you'll see is that which goes into your eyes – and that was our starting point. We only create the information an individual will see – which we can do because we know where the eyes are. So we can use a normal LCD to create a hologram, as long as we limit the information."

The addition of eye-tracking hardware, not dissimilar to Kinect, is the vital component. SeeReal is confident that it will be able to track multiple pairs of eyes simultaneously, projecting to each a separate virtual 3D image. In order to do this, the TV multiplexes, displaying screens for each user alternately, but at such great speed that each viewer sees an unbroken moving image. Since the human eye can detect the individual frames of an animation if there are fewer than 60 per second, a high refresh rate is needed for multiple viewers.

"For two viewing windows you use 120hz," says Stolle. "For three users you would need 360. The refresh rates [on consumer TVs] are improving every month now – technology-wise you can already serve four users."

The early prototype for this technology currently does not, however. Since the phase modulator technology underpinning it can't be bought from a shop yet, it had to be built from repurposed medical imaging equipment. The result is that the refresh rate is low, and the screen flickers while producing a full-colour image. On this early model, headtracking doesn't allow for considerable movement, either. Nonetheless, the presentation of 3D is genuinely startling – sufficient for us to reassess our stance on 3D entirely. We're able to toy with a 3D model of a spaceship, using a trackball to rotate it and move it closer and farther away – we can push it far into the distance beyond the screen, and drag it out of the display until it sits inches from our face. At all points it feels like a natural, physical object that we could reach out and hold – albeit a luminescent red one. Later, we're shown a tank full of water, its length tapering away from us, which see-saws forward and back. The illusion of a physical object is extremely convincing.

We also watch some colour animations that extend into the screen and note that we can focus on elements within the image as we please. With holography, the entire object is presented as it is in reality, and the viewer chooses which bit to focus on – look at the foreground and the background blurs as it would when you look at a real vista, and vice versa. This necessitates some changes in the language used by cinematographers, who are accustomed to drawing the viewer's eye with a shallow depth of field – ie, by blurring out all but one element of an image.

Even among traditional film experts, holographic 3D has advocates. **Felix Forrest**, a steadicam operator and director of photography, is one convert. "I am a big fan of cinematography and I have an absolute fear of and hatred for



Peter Holzapfel stereoscopic 3D producer, Crytek

Crytek's stereoscopic advocate on the technology's problematic present and future

Stereoscopic 3D still has its proponents, and not just from hardware manufacturers, but among creatives too. Crytek's Peter Holzapfel is keen to extol its virtues – as well he might, given that Avatar director James Cameron himself has applauded the stereoscopic 3D brought to bear on *Crysis 2* (see E224). According to Holzapfel, many of the problems will disappear as users adapt to focusing and converging on different points.

"Seeing stereoscopic 3D is something that users will get better at, since the muscles in the eye are trained by watching stereoscopic 3D," he says. Nonetheless, Crytek's own studies suggest that a non-trivial portion of the audience has difficulties with the technology. "Our latest numbers indicate that roughly ten per cent of the human population has some kind of stereo deficiency, although we are not aware of extensive long-term studies," says Holzapfel. "This ranges from not being able to see stereoscopic 3D at all to not coping with the effect as well as others."

Are these acceptable losses? Holzapfel insists that the majority have no problems whatsoever playing in 3D, and the numbers that do have issues will drop over time. Nor will there be any quick switch to holography.

"We will invest in switching to new technologies as soon as we can foresee that the technology is ready for the market," he says. "At the moment we expect hardware manufacturers to invest in stereoscopic 3D technology first before switching to holographic for example. Changing to true holographic 3D would probably mean rethinking a lot of our current methods."

stereoscopic 3D content, because I think it destroys a lot of the artform," he says. "That's the position I started from. Then I sat down at the first [SeeReal] demonstration and thought: 'I've got to change the way I shoot things'. I think we'll end up going back to some of the more traditional techniques like you would see with film noir, where you use light and shadow to draw your attention to things. It's a bit like lighting for theatre."

So too will cinematographers grapple with a changing sense of scale: when viewers are aware of being in a perspective relationship with a scene, it can be difficult to escape the impression of viewing a tiny diorama. And, although SeeReal's representatives say this is far less of an issue with holographic 3D than it is with stereoscopic 3D, quick cuts are also difficult to make, as the eye will be fatigued by rapid changes in focus. "It changes the pace at which you can tell a story," explains Forrest. "Action films become quite difficult – you can't do a lot of handheld camera work, so you lose a lot of the frenetic pace."

Clearly, true 3D display forces fundamental changes to the way the creative industries work, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. We watch a few stereoscopic showreels, ostensibly to prove that SeeReal's technology is backwards









Holographic 3D evangelists and creators (from left): cinematographer and steadicam operator Felix Forrest; SeeReal's CTO and business director Hagen Stolle; SeeReal's chairman Bo Krøll

compatible, but the result is to underline holographic 3D's superiority over its stereoscopic forebear – holography feels far less like a novel addition to the existing visual language and more like a new visual medium in itself. New areas of expression have opened up.

"It's much more participatory," says Forrest. "Because you are free to change your focal point, it allows for greater means of piquing your interest and keeping you engaged. You feel immersed. It's the difference between theatre and TV. And you can only get that with holographic 3D."

It's clear that the idea of viewer participation dovetails with the ambitions of an interactive medium, and it is conceivable that films will begin to take cues from videogames, too, presenting action with an enhanced spacial awareness. There is further potential: with the ability to project things into the space close to the viewer, the tracking hardware allows for a true Minority Report-style interface. And with the facial recognition already available in technologies such as Kinect, the multiplexing used to present different images to different viewers could equally be used to present entirely different films or games to people watching the same television. Splitscreen could become a thing of the past – multiple players would see only their own screen.

So, is this a case of '3D is dead, long live 3D'? Holographic 3D's improvement over stereoscopy is palpable, and its potential to alter the way we present video media clearly profound. But it's hard to say how quickly and inexpensively the adoption of holographic 3D will occur – such significant investment has already gone into stereoscopic 3D that it is difficult to see the heavyweights behind it being willing to change course suddenly. Nor is it clear how consumers will react to the prospect of a secondary technology upgrade so soon after the arrival of home 3D.

Although SeeReal has no great say in the price point of TVs using its technology, it isn't in the business of designing toasters, after all; this *will* be an expensive piece of kit – at least at first. With stereoscopic TV prices now coming down, consumers could be caught in between the obsolete and the unaffordable. It's hard to imagine holographic 3D, with its headtracking requirements, being able to scale for cinema viewing either. But though many such questions hang over the future of 3D, one thing has become very apparent on the basis of SeeReal's demonstration: stereoscopic 3D could soon be a part of its past.



SeeReal's prototype produces a convincing 3D effect, but is flickery and dim. "We modified an amplitude display made for medical imaging to be a phase modulator," Stolle explains

MICK HOCKING senior director, Sony Computer Entertainment Europe

Not everyone is down on the long-term prospects of stereoscopic 3D. One of those coming out swinging for the technology is **Mick Hocking**, head of Sony's internal 3D development team. We put to him the issues raised by SeeReal, Walter Murch and others.

With stereoscopic 3D, the viewer's eyes converge and focus at different distances. What problems does this cause? What are the solutions?
Firstly, this is much less of a problem than many people imagine. For example, just wearing a pair of reading glasses will cause a much larger decoupling of your focus/convergence than a typical stereoscopic image will generate [see footnote]. Even so, in many stereoscopic images, the subject is placed close to the plane of the screen which makes the image as comfortable to view as a 2D image. We always ensure that the separation of focus and convergence in our games is set within a comfortable range. In addition, we are also recommending that games include a slider to allow gamers to adjust the 3D effect to their own personal taste – a bit like a volume control on an MP3 player.

Do you have estimates for what percentage of people are able to see 3D comfortably?
Everybody's eyes will have differing abilities to focus, converge and perceive 3D, in a similar way that people have differing abilities to see 2D images. It does not necessarily mean that people can't see 3D, but perhaps that their 3D vision is not as good as others'. There have been all sorts of statistics flying around about the percentage of people who have very little 3D perception. In our experience, we rarely come across anyone who cannot perceive 3D.

There are issues with changing depth suddenly, because it strains the eyes to refocus quickly, too. Is this less of a problem with games? Is the only solution to compress the image depth, resulting in that cutout effect?
It is true that requiring the viewer to rapidly alter their convergence can lead to discomfort. Whether this is less of a problem for us will depend on the type of game. Typically, games have far fewer cuts between cameras than movies and so in this sense, rapid depth changes are much less likely. Compressing the depth, however, is a poor solution to this problem. The best current 3D films subtly alter stereoscopic settings to smooth out rapid depth changes, helping to maintain viewer comfort. Typically this is done as a post-production task. In games we obviously have the ability to do this dynamically to achieve the same effect if required.

How has the take-up of 3DTV compared to the take-up of HDTV? Is the slow start, if it has indeed been slow, a result of the perceived problems of stereoscopic 3D, or is it an apathy about 3D in general?
In terms of the take up of 3DTV it is currently believed that 3DTV sales are actually way ahead of where HDTV sales were at the equivalent point in the lifecycle. Given that we are still in a challenging economic environment and that last year was the first in which there was high-quality 3D content generally available, the comparatively strong sales of 3DTVs is actually a very encouraging sign for the future. I certainly don't see any apathy towards 3D, in fact quite the opposite. In our experience the vast majority of people are very excited about the benefits that 3D can bring. After all, this is probably the biggest change to TV since the transition from black-and-white to colour.

> I certainly don't see any apathy towards 3D. The vast majority of people are very excited. This is probably the biggest change to TV since the transition from black-and-white to colour

Does Sony have plans for other forms of 3D, like holographic, which solve the issues arising from differing angles and distances?
Of course we are actively researching many other techniques and uses of 3D for gaming. We're looking into areas like head tracking, for viewing optimisation and holographic effects. DualView technology that allows two players to enjoy full-screen multiplayer on the same screen, and 3D head-mounted displays and many more – watch this space!

With 3DTV, it can feel like you are observing a miniature diorama through a window. How can you re-assert a grander sense of scale?
Achieving dramatic scale is certainly more of a challenge on a 3DTV than it is at an IMAX cinema. However, having said that, achieving small, intimate scenes on a giant screen is a similar challenge. Carefully chosen stereoscopic settings and really compelling content can help the viewer overcome any limitations. With the games that we have already developed in 3D we've seen some success in delivery of scenes with epic scale, in games like *Shadow Of The Colossus*. We have also great examples of increasing the sense of height and almost delivering a sense of vertigo in games like *MotorStorm: Apocalypse* and *Killzone 3*.



Stereoscopic images on TV-sized displays are a relatively new phenomenon and we are only just beginning to explore their potential. With 3D games we have the ability to not only deliver compelling content and adjust 3D settings on the fly to achieve the desired effect we want, but we can also interact with the 3D scene to further immerse the player into the gaming world.

Footnote: We referred this claim to a developmental optometrist, Dr **Leonard Press** of Family Eyecare Associates (pressvision.com) and the Visionhelp blog (visionhelp.wordpress.com). He says: "Reading glasses don't cause the same effect [as stereoscopic 3D]. When they are needed, it is because the focusing system is *not* in plane with the convergence system. Reading glasses are used to put the two systems back in the same location. This is a complex topic, and there are many other reasons why the stereoscopic 3D sustained viewing environment is much different than the reading glasses condition." The decoupling effect Hocking alludes to would only occur if the wearer of reading glasses *did not need* reading glasses.

INTERVIEW

A Bizarre farewell

Three senior figures at Bizarre Creations help us pick through the issues surrounding the studio's demise

After more than 15 years making games, Liverpool-based studio Bizarre Creations closed its doors in February after its owner of over three years, Activision, failed to find a buyer.

We catch up with the studio's former creative director **Martyn Chudley** along with his wife, former commercial director **Sarah Chudley**, and former design manager **Gareth Wilson** – lead designer of *Blur* and now chief game designer at Sumo Digital – to talk about the studio's evolution and look at the reasons behind its passing.

Before the buyout by Activision, was Bizarre Creations struggling?

Martyn Chudley: No. We had money in the bank, and several potential projects to work on. However, coming towards the end of *PGR4* and *The Club*, we took a decision that – as signing up new projects was a time-consuming and costly venture – affiliating ourselves more closely to a publisher would help provide security [to] safeguard the future, given that there would be no downtime between projects, or needing to go though the whole demo/pitch/negotiate cycle. Activision's desire for a racing project just seemed to fit the bill perfectly. Also, with our then current partners, Microsoft didn't want an action team, and Sega didn't need a racing team. With Activision, with the racing desire and Bond licence, the entire studio was deemed a great fit.

"The clean sheet of paper that Blur presented us with probably didn't play to our strengths. I think the game achieved all of its goals, but it just didn't resonate with the public"

How did the atmosphere at the studio differ across the Bizarre years, Microsoft years and Activision years? Where they three different flavours of studio?

MC: I don't think the atmosphere differed too much during the years before Activision – we were always proudly independent, and we always tried our best to do what we felt was right for our people, the games and the company.

However, when Activision took over, we – and they themselves, I'm sure – really felt that they would leave our culture alone, and for a while it was fine, but slowly, as it seems happens with many corporate takeovers, the feeling did start to change. We weren't an independent studio making 'our' games any more – we were making games to fill slots. Although we did all believe in them, they were more the products of committees and analysts. And when you add in corporate HR, corporate email, etc, the culture we'd worked on for so long gradually eroded just enough that it wasn't 'ours' any more.

Sarah Chudley: I suppose it's a telling thing that in the last weeks, many people were saying they would never work anywhere like Bizarre again – and there's a surprising number of individuals and startups who are therefore looking to go it alone.

Gareth Wilson: As the studio got bigger there was a bit of a loss of that intimate, family feeling, not through the fault of anyone but simply just the reality of managing so many people. It's a challenge for any studio these days to make everyone on the team feel like they're really contributing to the game when there could be well over 100 people on a single game in production.





From left: Martyn Chudley, Bizarre's creative director; Sarah Chudley, Bizarre's commercial director; and Gareth Wilson, now at Sumo







Though famed for straight-up racing games, Bizarre frequently experimented with other ideas and genres. From *Geometry Wars* (above) to *Blood Stone* (centre) and the powered-up arcade action of *Blur* (top), Bizarre's legacy is one of vibrant titles

How did the production of *Blur* differ to the production of *PGR*?
MC: *Blur* was a strange one in that we started the project with no idea what the end product would be. The feedback from Activision was that we needed a racing franchise to fit within a certain segment of the market, to stay away from other segments, to create a franchise that was fun, accessible and unique, and one that was not *PGR*. The clean sheet of paper that *Blur* presented us with probably didn't play to our strengths. I think the game achieved all of its goals, but it just didn't resonate with the games-buying public, which is a real shame. Perhaps it was the blending of genres, as with *The Club* and *Fur Fighters*, that contributed to its commercial failure. It was probably just too tough to pigeonhole.
SC: I think Activision's involvement in the whole process, from design meetings through feature choices, from locations through to the name and branding, was a big change from what we'd seen in the past. Microsoft, Sega and Sony/Psygnosis were more hands-off. So that's something we had to get used to, especially in the final stages of design and development.
GW: Ultimately the game got delayed so we could reach the level of quality we were happy with at Bizarre, which messed up our marketing campaign and gave us a less-favourable release date.

Was there a chance to buy back the studio?
MC: Without going into details, yes, there was, but I personally thought that there was far greater potential for the security and well-being of the company if a third party could come in. Sadly, this was not to be the case.
SC: In any case, Bizarre had grown even more since they took over, and we just don't have the skills, capability or finances to look after over 200 people. Martyn and I were always small-company people, which is why we stepped aside when we realised it needed big-company skills to manage.

A buyout by a big publisher is often intended to future-proof a studio, so why didn't this work out for Bizarre – were there key mistakes made by either party?
GW: Why Bizarre was closed is way beyond my pay scale. If you want a personal opinion, though, I think it was a perfect storm of unfortunate circumstances. If anything, the mistake we made was underestimating how difficult it was getting a new IP off the ground at this stage of the console cycle, especially in the racing space, which tends to perform better when a new console is launched.



To Sumo and beyond

Following Bizarre's collapse, its staff are following a variety of opportunities

Bizarre's closure has created a diaspora of dev talent, many of whom have been snapped up by nearby studios or have set up on their own, hoping to make headway in the indie scene. *Geometry Wars* designer Stephen Cakebread, for example, will ply his wares on iPhone, PC and Mac, joining fellow Bizarre alumni Peter Collier and Ben Ward at startup Hogrocket. Meanwhile, economic development company Liverpool Vision has put money into Lucid Games, established with the explicit hope of hoovering up 50 or so of Bizarre's key staff. Former Bizarre design manager Gareth Wilson, however, has headed east to Sheffield, joining Sumo Digital as its chief game designer. Having been lead designer on *Blur*, Wilson's racing chops should mesh well with Sumo's proven expertise, its portfolio including *OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast* and *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*.

Newswire



Publishers support earthquake relief

Numerous publishers and developers have pledged support to the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami relief effort. Nintendo, Namco, Sony and Tecmo Koei are among the companies who are donating to charity in a bid to help those affected by the worst quake to hit Japan since records began 140 years ago. Shortly after the earthquake, many Japanese developers took to Twitter to update fans, with CyberConnect's Hiroshi Matsuyama tweeting to announce that his studio was open to the public for shelter. Many publishers have delayed software releases in light of the catastrophe, including Sega's *Yakuza: Of The End* and Irem's *Disaster Report 4*, the latter having been postponed indefinitely.



"We managed very well, and almost magically, to explain this fact: basically he drank a potion that made him younger! Yes, you'll tell me, 'What the hell?!' But we're just like that!"
Katsuhiro Harada elegantly explains away Heihachi's more youthful appearance in *Tekken Tag Tournament 2*

"Don't write about being a rookie soldier in WWII, because you don't have a clue what that's like. Talk about yourself, your life, your emotions, the people around you, what you like, what you hate – this is how the industry will make a huge step forwards. I'm fed up with space marines."
David Cage possibly laments the absence of lingering shower sequences throughout the *Halo* franchise

"Well, I want to make it. About 200 people will buy it, I think. Probably Sega will let me make it. I think. But funding is an issue."
Yu Suzuki stays positive about the prospects of a third *Shenmue* game. Apparently, the first game only cost $47m. Who's in for a whip-round?

"I was never cool enough for the cool kids, but never geeky enough for the geeks. You need to be a chameleon, you need to be able to sit down with the hardcore coder, the hippie artist, and sit down with the marketing guy and get drunk and have fun with him. Do not be afraid to be public with yourself… You are forming a brand here and you are the frontman; if you are the face of the company you have to stay humble."
Epic Games' **Cliff Bleszinski** reveals that in reality the fast cars and pimp suits were simply about blending in

"A lot of people are complaining about the iPad's screen resolution not changing with this iteration, but I actually think that's a good thing, for games especially. To make a high-end game like *Infinity Blade*, the processing power per pixel matters. So if they had doubled or tripled the density of that screen, it would have crippled our ability to make hi-res games."
Donald Mustard, CEO of Chair Entertainment, reminds us to be thankful for what we've got



INTERVIEW

Kings of Kong

From Samus Aran to Donkey Kong, what's behind Retro Studios' unique understanding of the Nintendo difference?

For the past ten years or so, Austin-based Retro Studios has enjoyed a deeply creative relationship with Nintendo. It has resulted in *Metroid Prime*, its bold translation of one of Nintendo's greatest 2D game series into 3D, and has most recently created *Donkey Kong Country Returns*, a deftly balanced update that faithfully adapts the originals' charm for a modern audience. But why has Nintendo placed such trust in this American studio? How does the relationship work? What is it about Retro? What is it about Nintendo? We meet with **Kensuke Tanabe**, the Nintendo producer who oversaw the *Metroid Prime* trilogy and *DKCR*, and Retro Studios president **Michael Kelbaugh** to find out.

"I personally would much rather be judged based on the quality of my product as opposed to whether or not it made it out on time"

To what extent is there a Nintendo philosophy of gaming?
Kensuke Tanabe: More than perhaps what may be the typical stance of 'we want to make this thing that we know that we like', the stance at Nintendo is very much along the lines of 'we want to make the consumer excited about something'. We want them to be entertained. Take the example of Wii Fit. If a developer who had long been making FPS games was tasked with developing it, it's my personal feeling that not many staff would be all that jazzed about it. But the idea at Nintendo is that we are going to entertain people with this product, and by virtue of that fact people are interested and engaged in making it.

Do you think that any studio can work so closely with Nintendo as Retro?
Michael Kelbaugh: As much as would like to say that Retro is special, the reality is that it's the employees, their mentality and the mentorship that we've been given to train us to think like Nintendo employees. So we're just fortunate in the sense that we've had the exposure and the expectation is for us to perform as a Nintendo developer.

So, what is a Nintendo developer?
MK: The priorities of another developer are different. In many cases it's: 'It has to be done on this date'. That's not our priority – it's not done, in fact it's never done as far as we're concerned. It's constant refinement – is it good enough? Are we going to meet expectations? And if it comes to that point that the date comes and we decide it's not good enough, we take more time. I personally would much rather be judged based on the quality of my product as opposed to whether or not it made it out on time because, ten years from now, people are going to come back and look at the product that Retro worked on and say, "That's a great game". They're not going to remember whether or not it came out on time.

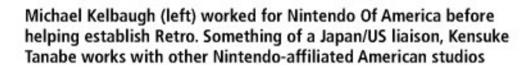
How has your work changed over the ten years you've been collaborating?
KT: The job itself hasn't changed so much, but when we worked on the first *Prime* I was focused on the controls, and the visor system was something that I thought up with Retro. So I would do a lot of brainstorming, firming up specs with them for things like Meta Ridley. And moving on to *Donkey Kong*, we were doing a lot of the same things, figuring out how the ground-pound was going to work, what kind of theme we were going to employ for a given level and boss. But one thing that really has changed over the years for us is that Retro has gradually come to really think like Nintendo. So there's been a lot less need for explanation and supervision.
MK: In *Metroid*, we would create a large number







From the solidity of its visuals to the construction of its platforming, *Donkey Kong Country Returns* (left) reflects the original template, while *Metroid Prime* (below) plays more loosely with its forebears



Michael Kelbaugh (left) worked for Nintendo Of America before helping establish Retro. Something of a Japan/US liaison, Kensuke Tanabe works with other Nintendo-affiliated American studios

of assets and send them to Tanabe-san for review and he would add a number of changes. What has changed since then is that before we even start creating assets we have a much better understanding of his expectations and vision. We don't throw away a lot of work any more.

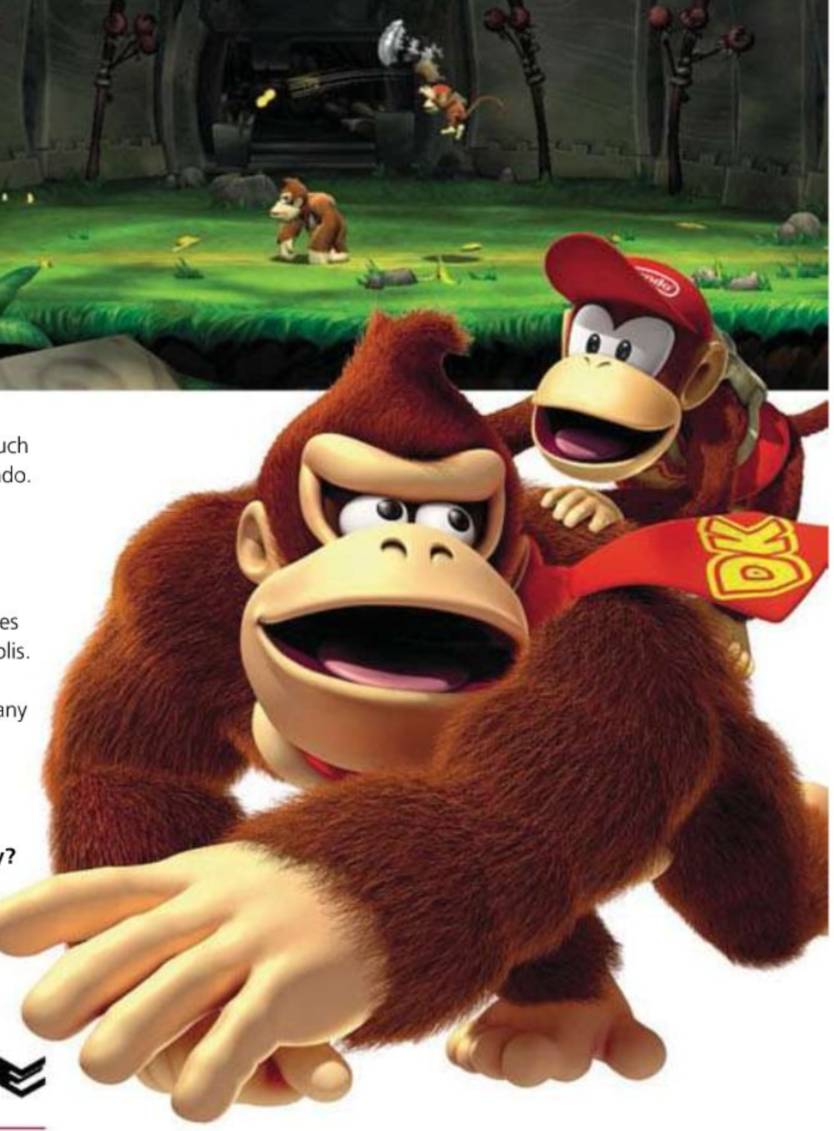
Are there any benefits to working on this international scale?
KT: Certainly one thing I think that has come out of this is cultural perspective. Until I began working with Retro I hadn't seen with my own eyes what American gamers were finding interesting. And vice versa, people at Retro through our interactions have seen what resonates with a Japanese gamer. By seeing the Venn diagram of everything coming together I think it's been a really effective way to see what kind of gameplay, what kind of entertainment, works internationally.

Does that mean that some of the lessons you've learned have been fed into projects Nintendo in Japan has made subsequently?
KT: Certainly. I work not just with international developers but with game developers in Japan, and the things I've learned and seen across these projects certainly get fed back into those projects as well. Certainly that process exists, it happens.

When you started working with Retro, did you look back at the way that Nintendo had worked with Rare Software for guidance?
KT: Back in the days of Rare, Mr Miyamoto had direct contact with the developer; that was his project. Unfortunately I don't think that Mr Miyamoto went over to Rare and did face-to-face visits really, and without email having been involved in the way it is today, a lot of communication happened by fax, and I think it made it really difficult for him to relay his vision and experiences the same way. So because of those difficulties that existed I don't think I really tried to take too much from the relationship between Rare and Nintendo.

Is it important to Nintendo to have strong relationships with foreign developers?
KT: I absolutely believe so. I work with other development partners, such as Next Level Games in Vancouver and Monster Studios in Minneapolis. And they, much like Retro, really get our development philosophies. I want to find as many people as we can, as many great companies as we can to get involved with. I'm really looking for developers with a sense of craftsmanship.

Do you think that's common enough today?
KT: Of course I haven't seen every company out there, but my personal opinion is that I see that there's a real increase in the number of companies that look like they're really running a business for business' sake. There are many of those certainly within the midst of the gaming industry as a whole, or at least I feel that way.













From top: Media Sandbox's Clare Reddington; Remode's Ella Romanos and Martin Darby; Mobile Pie's Will Luton; and Mutant Labs' Alex Riley



EVENT

The procedural generation

We visit the third Media Sandbox showcase to find out how the development programme is encouraging new game talent

We're standing in the middle of a crowded room shouting at an iPad. Those around us are unconcerned, but that's perhaps unsurprising when a sculpture created in scent and a new electronic musical instrument – dubbed an Alphasphere – number among the other attractions here. Our raised voice isn't down to (virtual) controller-hurling frustration, however, but a desperate attempt to stop the lander in developer Mutant Lab's *Sonic Moon* game from crashing into the planet's surface and exploding. While the craft's rotation is handled by the touchscreen, the thrusters respond to tone and volume – volume that inevitably rises when the embarrassed hush of our initial efforts fails to slow the descent sufficiently.

This is the third annual Media Sandbox showcase, a development programme focused on south-west England and created by iShed – itself an initiative started by the Bristol-based Watershed media centre. The programme seeks to encourage innovative technology companies to take risks and follow up opportunities by providing help to support research and development. This year, seven £10,000 commissions were awarded under two strands: 'open data' and 'pervasive media'.

"Without proper R&D you don't know whether they're going to turn you into the next Nintendo, or sink your company"

"I think pervasive media, which basically means when you fuse the digital and physical world, has a lot to learn from gaming and a lot to offer gaming," says iShed and Pervasive Media Studio director **Clare Reddington**. "A lot of the projects we've done in the past have been locative gaming or street gaming projects, which blend gaming and technology out in the city. And a lot of the practitioners we work with are taking those kinds of ideas back into the more traditional gaming world."

Three of the seven companies to win Media Sandbox's support this year – including, of course, Mutant Labs – are independent videogame developers, demonstrating a refreshing parity for an industry not always considered the artistic or creative equal of other media sectors. Alongside the money, companies are also assigned a dedicated business advisor to help hammer out a route-to-market plan for their projects, as well as access to industry advisors including Tim Scott, the senior policy adviser for videogames and film at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and Microsoft Labs senior researcher Kenton O'Hara.



"It's really difficult for small companies and startups to get access to the kind of support, funding, time and space that's needed to develop leftfield ideas that might be harder to sell – the kind of ideas that publishers and investors simply aren't going to take a risk on," explains Reddington. "It's only in pitch mode that most companies are able to think about these ideas, but without proper R&D you don't know how much they're worth; you don't know whether they're going to turn you into the next Nintendo, or sink your company."

Ella Romanos, managing director of developer Remode, echoes Reddington's feelings: "When we started it was impossible to even get to pitch to a publisher. It's a justifiable barrier; there's so many people wanting to make games they can't possibly







Intimate interactions were a theme, encouraged by the Alphasphere (far left) and scent sculpture (right). Shouting at an iPad (centre) creates a sense of connection with the game

While the sensor required to play Remode's *Sky Cycle* (left) isn't elegant, it's a fine demonstration of the gameplay possibilities of in biometric feedback. Right: Android title *Blossom Bristol*

talk to everyone. Since we released [PC puzzler] *Mole Control* we've managed to get meetings with EA and Microsoft and it just breaks down all these barriers, but what we've found is that because we're new, publishers still want to see [new ideas] working. They'll say: 'It's a really great concept and we like it, but you're still a bit of a risk'."

To that end, Remode has used the breathing space Media Sandbox allows to develop a working prototype of a game called *Sky Cycle*, an airborne shooter for Wii that's reminiscent of Namco's 1996 arcade game *Prop Cycle*. Players pilot their aircraft with the Nunchuck while aiming and firing at each wave of approaching enemies with the Remote, but where Namco's game requires players to pedal in order to stay aloft, Remode's prototype monitors players' heart-rates with a sensor worn around the chest. Raising your heartbeat moves a slider at the top of the screen, reach the centre and you become super-powered, able to destroy entire waves with a flick of the Remote – raise it too far, however, and you'll lose the power-up, necessitating some deep breathing to calm down.

While EA has already proven that there are commercial applications for such tech with its active heart monitor, Remode's use of heart rate as an input device, as opposed to simply monitoring, holds a great deal of potential. We can't help but imagine how *LA Noire*'s interrogation scenes might feel if it wasn't only the NPCs trying to conceal something. Production director **Martin Darby** is keen to stress that *Sky Cycle* is no moral crusade, simply an attempt to create a fun experience using biometric feedback, but the exercise certainly isn't going to do anyone any harm. Similarly, Mutant Labs has wider applications in mind for its tech, as its MD **Alex Riley** explains: "Often, physically handicapped gamers have to adapt controllers, and it's basically a hack in order to play the game. So we thought: 'What if the whole concept of playing the game was just done through voice control, including the menus and gameplay?' It's open to everyone that way, and nobody is necessarily better than anyone else, which really appealed to us."

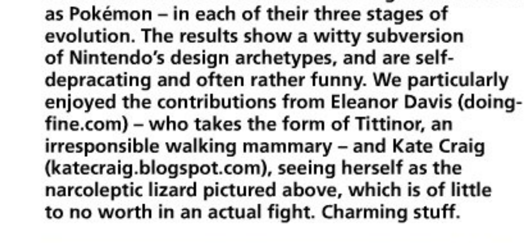
Blossom Bristol, meanwhile, covers the social gaming end of the spectrum. Developed by Mobile Pie, the Android game allows players to plant virtual seeds across the titular city, which will then grow or die subject to real-life data values – such as air or water quality, and general weather conditions – released by the council as part of an open data scheme. Mobile Pie creative producer **Will Luton** is adamant that such a project couldn't have happened without support from a scheme like Media Sandbox. "It manages to get people thinking about the human benefit of games, rather than just the commercial benefit," he says. "There's no way we'd get this funding from a traditional publisher; if we approached Sega or Sony saying: 'We want to do a game which is about pollution using rural values from the council'. We're probably not going to get the money to do it! So the ability for us to test these mechanics and ideas in a way which is quite open and accepting is absolutely fantastic. It's really important for us, and I think also for games as an art form."

Darby is also a keen advocate: "The industry's changing, and the line between traditional development and operating as a digital agency is eroding and becoming blurred. The internet's disruptive, mobile development's now disruptive, and I think this kind of scheme focuses on where the next disruption's going to be."

We'd hazard a guess that it will be in the quiet carriage when somebody starts shouting at their iPad.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH



Imagining yourself into a fiction is usually the hallmark of the obsessed amateur – the sort of thing that clogs up DeviantArt and gives you an unwelcome slash-fiction-flavoured shock when sifting through Google Image Search. It's quite a different class of thing when the big boys and girls do it. Curated by comic artist Steven Wolfhard (catrackham.com), the Portraitdex sees eminent artists reimagine themselves as Pokémon – in each of their three stages of evolution. The results show a witty subversion of Nintendo's design archetypes, and are self-depracating and often rather funny. We particularly enjoyed the contributions from Eleanor Davis (doing-fine.com) – who takes the form of Tittinor, an irresponsible walking mammary – and Kate Craig (katecraig.blogspot.com), seeing herself as the narcoleptic lizard pictured above, which is of little to no worth in an actual fight. Charming stuff.

Site: Portraitdex
URL: portraitdex.tumblr.com


DEVELOPMENT

Becoming Streetwise

Double Fine is currently working on its first educational children's title, but the team has had to learn its own lessons about game development along the way



Top: Double Fine founder Tim Schafer. Above: programmer and *Once Upon A Monster* creator Nathan Martz

Tim Schafer has never been one to dodge a challenge. From the surreal platformer *Psychonauts* through heavy metal fantasy romp *Brütal Legend* and on to *Stacking*, he has given his stamp of approval – and sharp Pythonesque humour – to seemingly every offbeat idea his Double Fine team has thrown at him. So when *Brütal Legend* lead programmer **Nathan Martz** came along four years ago with the concept for a children's storybook game about helping cute monsters overcome their fears, he went for it immediately. Along the way, the studio picked up the Sesame Street licence and incorporated its characters into the project – along with Kinect support. The result looks to be a beautifully stylised and intuitive dancing and action game.

> **"With kids you have to assume… not a hostile player, but a complete force of nature. They'll lie on the floor or turn their backs – they are uncontrollable agents of anarchy"**

Although some fans have been sceptical about the news of a Double Fine children's title, Shafer asserts that it's a natural progression of the studio's past work. "There's always been a kid-friendly element to what we've done," he says. "With *Psychonauts* there was a definite attempt to appeal to younger as well as older players – to work on two levels. Sesame Street has always been an inspiration in terms of how to do comedy for kids and adults at the same time. As a child you don't get all the jokes but you know it's funny. As an adult, you realise there's a whole level of cleverness and wit to what Jim Henson and Frank Oz were doing. I was really inspired by that – it's something we strive for. And there's something about connecting with children that puts you in touch with your emotions."

A project aimed specifically at children has, however, required the team to think about design in a new way. Throughout development, it has consulted with Carla Fisher, an expert in the interaction between children, education and gaming who has spoken at GDC. "She provided us with a framework for understanding what children are capable of," Schafer explains. "If you look at their gross motor skills, there are things we take for granted, like jumping and leaving the ground, and ambidextrous behaviours like doing something with one hand and something slightly different with the other – these are challenging for a kid."

A key element, then, has been focus testing – getting children and their parents in front of the game from the beginning, even when it was still in the prototype phase. "In a normal game, when you're near the end and don't want to fix a bug you'll say: 'Oh, we'll just assume a friendly player'," Schafer admits. "But with kids you have to assume… not a hostile player, but a complete force of nature. They will run towards the camera, they'll run out of the screen, they'll lie on the floor or turn their backs – they are uncontrollable agents of

Life on the street

Double Fine's monster training methods exposed

Double Fine has also had to closely integrate elements of the official Sesame Street curriculum, which covers numeracy, literacy and emotional development. The team had to ensure that when the game covers themes like shyness and bravery, it does it in the Sesame way. "A powerful tool that Sesame Street uses a lot is what they call modelling," explains Martz. "You'll see a character demonstrate how you should behave in a certain circumstance – they model that behaviour for the child. We do a lot of that in the game. In a cutscene, you'll see Cookie and Elmo demonstrate what good behaviour looks like or show how to identify an emotion. Then we'll also get the player to model good behaviour back to the storybook monsters. It's a chance to teach by encouraging kids to express good behaviour themselves, and it's fun because now they're the expert, they're teaching the monster!"





Continue

Street Pass
The office Mii exchange programme is in full effect

Adjustable 3D depth
Little more. Little less. Little more. Little less…

Leaderboards
Because *Trials HD* rivalries bring coworkers together

Quit

Embargoes
We're not allowed to tell you how good *Portal 2* is

'Xbox 720'
This will not be the name of Microsoft's next console

FPS blood spatters
The new lens flare. We have eyes, not cameras

The core message of *Once Upon A Monster* is a rather wonderful one: happiness. "Our industry is very monotonic emotionally," says Martz. "It's all burly steroid-filled dudes talking about honour and death – I wanted to do a game about joy!"

anarchy. For me, it's really personal. It's very moving when my daughter comes in to the office and laughs with the game – I could watch that all day long. Realising she's the audience for the game makes everything about it more appealing to me."

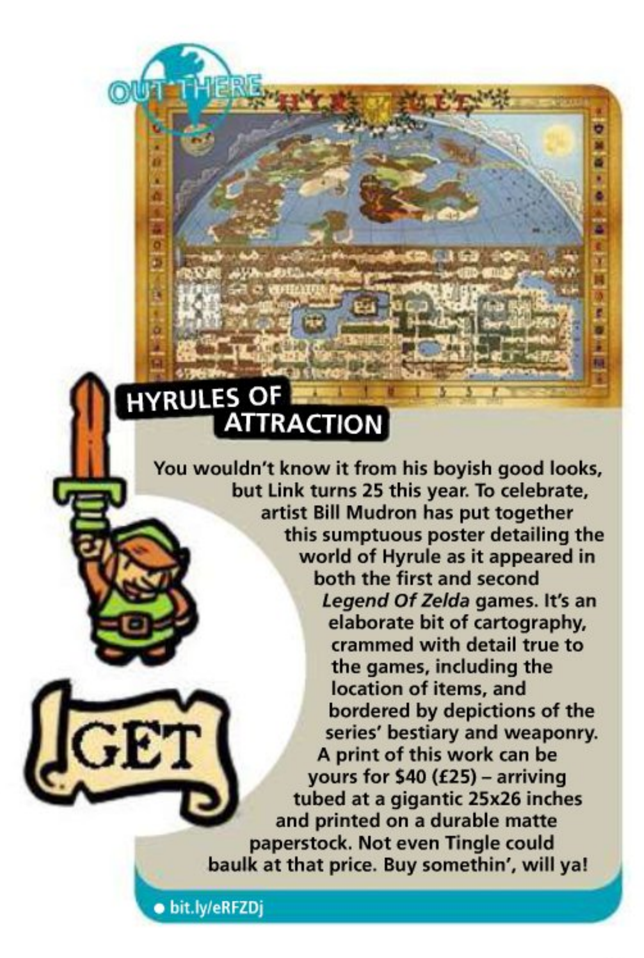
The structure of *Once Upon A Monster*, which is divided into five chapters, each based around a different monster, has also been designed specifically for children. "We heard from parents who told us: 'I love playing games with my kids, but it's really hard getting them to stop – they want to play forever'. So we separated it into bite-sized segments, which means parents can say: 'OK, we're going to play one chapter', and each one has a natural conclusion so you feel like you can put it down. In fact, you can play just one five-minute activity – there's a natural closure."



The game's visuals match the art of illustrator and comic book creator Scott Campbell with the Sesame Street cast. Double Fine is in constant contact with the Sesame Workshop, which advises on everything from what Cookie Monster can and can't say to the way Elmo's arm and leg joints move. Other influences include Calvin and Hobbes and Where The Wild Things Are

The Kinect support has also helped in building an experience suitable for children aged between four and six. In each chapter there are various physical tasks: we play one level in which we help a monster have a birthday party – there are dancing challenges, as well as areas where we need to run through the woods, jumping over fallen trees and ducking under branches. "Kinect has really helped – especially with the youngest kids," says Martz. "It's much easier for them to physically duck than to learn where the X button is. But what we've learned about Kinect is, if the player *thinks* they're doing it right, by and large, the game needs to recognise it as right. It's not like a traditional game where your inputs are unambiguous – either you did press the a button or you did not, and we'll grade you strictly on it. You need to provide a much squishier set of affordances to make that kind of interface fun for kids. You need to be flexible and forgiving."

Ultimately, Martz reckons the most important lesson is that is hasn't been necessary to abandon the studio's offbeat style to incorporate education themes and issues. "We thought it would be mostly about curriculum and technique, and that's a big part of it, but you can do substantive, enriching stuff and still have humour," he explains. "As Tim would say, Sesame Street was a stealth comedy show, especially in the early years. It has a lot of those New York improv comic sensibilities about it. So, actually, one of the biggest lessons we've learned about writing games for children is to be funny."



HYRULES OF ATTRACTION

You wouldn't know it from his boyish good looks, but Link turns 25 this year. To celebrate, artist Bill Mudron has put together this sumptuous poster detailing the world of Hyrule as it appeared in both the first and second *Legend Of Zelda* games. It's an elaborate bit of cartography, crammed with detail true to the games, including the location of items, and bordered by depictions of the series' bestiary and weaponry. A print of this work can be yours for $40 (£25) – arriving tubed at a gigantic 25x26 inches and printed on a durable matte paperstock. Not even Tingle could baulk at that price. Buy somethin', will ya!

• bit.ly/eRFZDj

INCOMING

Catherine

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **ATLUS/TBC**



Having conquered Japan's charts, the *Persona* team's femme fatale is heading west. Hopefully a localisation will make some sense of all those nightmares, sheep and crotch shots. Or not

Serious Sam 3: BFE

FORMAT: **360, PC** PUBLISHER: **TBC**



What could that initialism stand for? Wags have suggested 'Budget FPS Entry'. Potential price point aside, early pics of the third Croteam game set the carnage in a Middle Eastern city

Scrolls

FORMAT: **TBC** PUBLISHER: **MOJANG**



Notch announces his next project before *Minecraft*'s even finished: a digital collectible card and board game – like chess but with magic. Limited alpha is set to cast its spell later this year

Depth

FORMAT: **TBC** PUBLISHER: **TBC**



Drawn from the murky talent pool of EA, Epic and Tripwire, devs chum the waters with new details of their shark-vs-diver multiplayer. Sneaky scuba action and shark-vision modes lurk

Trenched

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**



Following short but sweet treats *Costume Quest* and *Stacking*, Double Fine turns its trademark wit on the laugh-a-minute mech warfare genre. Expect a salvo of whimsy to hit XBLA this summer

Ruined

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **BIGPOINT**



Are browser games coming of age? Bigpoint's arena shooter moves with some urgency despite complex level geometry and attractive cel-shading. More importantly, it has *really* big guns

Age Of Empires Online

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**



Hopes are high that Gas Powered Games' free-to-play title will be back-to-basics glory rather than fly-weight fodder. Visually, it looks set to bring some bold colour back to armchair warfare

Ace Combat Assault Horizon

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**



If the fast and furious trailer, showing the usual US jets along with Apache choppers, is anything to go by, *Assault Horizon* will suitably follow-up *Fires Of Liberation* with more of everything

Fallen Frontier

FORMAT: **TBC** PUBLISHER: **TBC**



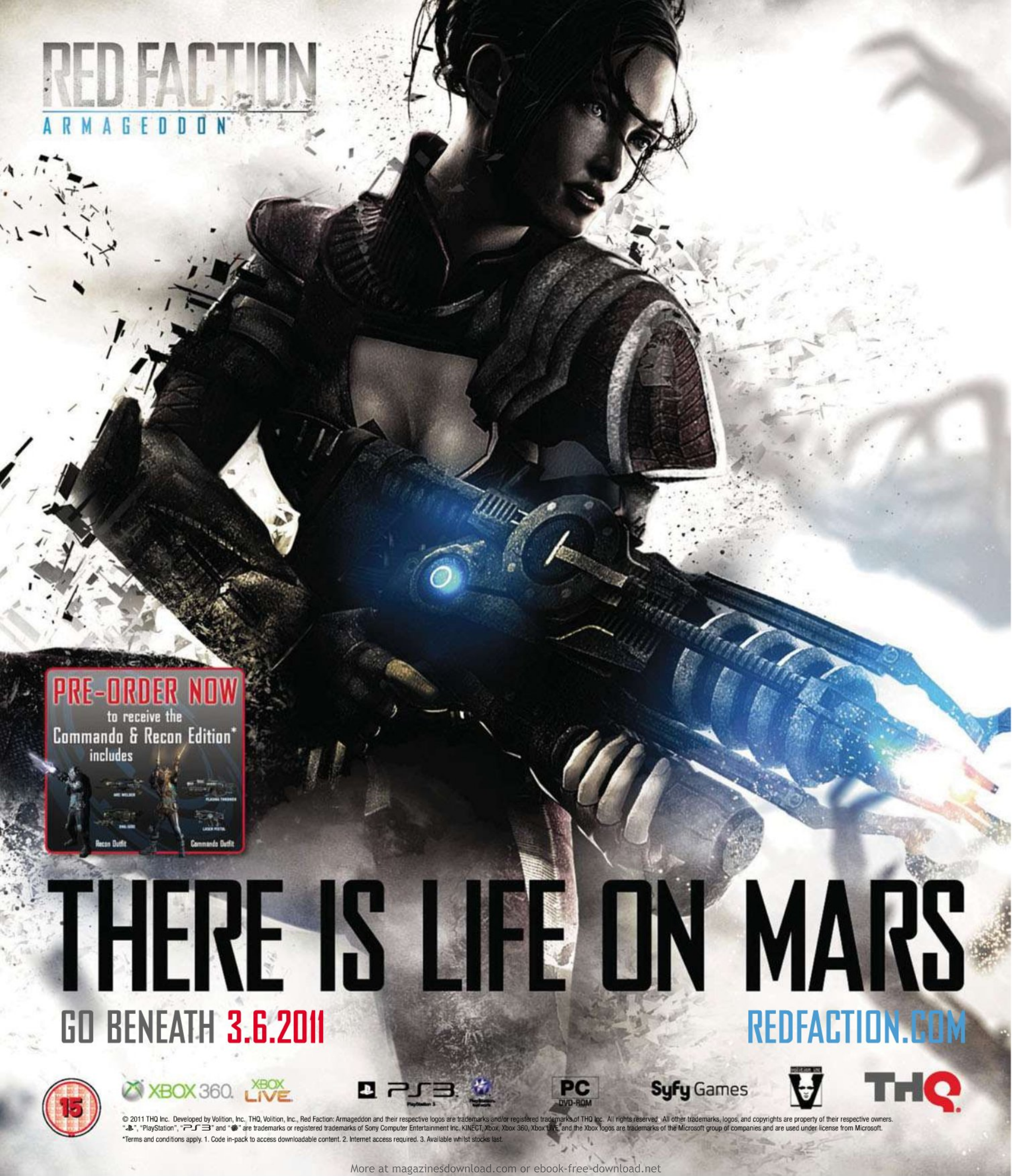
With three of Moonshot Games' four staff ex-Bungie, it's no surprise that its debut, a side-scrolling sci-fi adventure, has a hint of *Halo*'s art design. Sci-fi noir goes 2D. With a grappling hook



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH
Spent

www.playspent.com

Unless you just want to use this magazine as bedding, your interest in hobbyist electronics suggests you're not in the demographic most at risk of becoming homeless. In our privileged position, it's sometimes hard to see how it might happen, but for a large portion of – particularly American – society, homelessness is only a pay cheque away. Developed in association with the US-based community support NGO Urban Ministries of Durham, *Spent* puts you on the poverty line and presents you with the sorts of calamities that push people over the edge. It takes the form of a branching questionnaire spotted with minigames – a sort of 'choose your own breakdown'. Do you pay car tax or risk a fine just so you can afford to buy your kid's school lunch? How far away from work can you afford to live? The suburbs are cheap, but transport is not. What if your car breaks down? The consequences chart an all-too-plausible trajectory. It's a big issue, indeed – and now a slightly more accessible one, even for those of us with the luxury of an internet connection.


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In association with Screen Digest

The online console business shapes up

Piers Harding-Rolls examines numbers for online activity



Last year was the biggest yet for the online console platforms, as spending on online games content and services through consoles increased again and broke the £1bn mark for the first time. While I believe that sales on Nintendo's Wii and through Wi-Fi Connect came off the boil marginally from the previous year, both Microsoft's Xbox Live and Sony's PSN continue to grow their share of overall console business. These online console platforms are now home to very large numbers of active gamers who are happy to spend overall increasing amounts on different types of games downloads (arcade, new release, indie and back catalogue), games expansions and, notably, virtual items to upgrade avatars and virtual rooms and homes available on different services.

Taking subscriptions into account, spending on online content and services amounts to almost a nine per cent share of all games spending on consoles

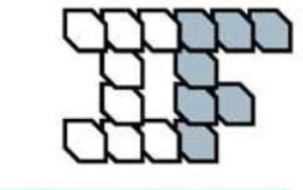
IHS Screen Digest pegged online console gamers' games content spending across Xbox 360, PS3 and Wii at £636m ($1bn) during 2010, just over a five per cent share of total games spending on these platforms. This data includes spending on downloadable games, expansion packs for games and personalisation virtual items including avatar upgrades and virtual space upgrades such as those found in PlayStation Home. The content sales business remains larger than the spending on subscription to access online console services such as Xbox Live Gold and PlayStation Plus. Spending on these subscriptions totalled £520m ($836m) for the year, taking the total spending across content and service provision to £1.15bn ($1.85bn). Taking subscriptions into account, spending on online content and services amounts to almost a nine per cent share of all games spending on these consoles.

So, what can we expect in the future? First up, Wii online console sales are predicted to fall over

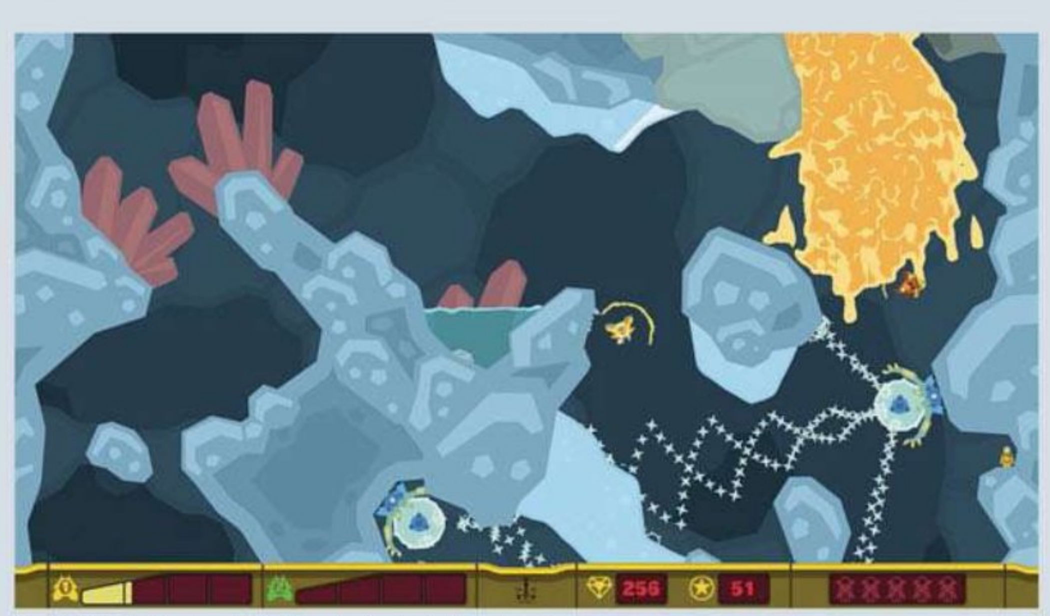


Paid-for DLC for *Mass Effect 2* has added new weapons and suits of armour to the game, along with a vehicle, a new character and many new missions. Some of the DLC has been exclusive to certain platforms, or was available as part of certain preorder offers









PixelJunk Shooter 2, reviewed in E226, can be downloaded from the PlayStation Store. As Q Games' first direct sequel to a *PixelJunk* game, it underlines the viability of the download platform for game sales

the next few years as activity on that console slows down. In the past Nintendo's approach to online content and services has been unique but also less embracing than both Microsoft and Sony. Nintendo's approach to digital distribution and online services is clearly developing, illustrated by a more accented strategy for network services for the 3DS this year. It is likely that Nintendo will once again drive online console sales when a follow up to the Wii hits the market at the end of 2012 and into 2013.

Aside from the Wii, I expect increasing online console spend from Xbox 360 and PS3 gamers as these communities of users become more entrenched and services are built upon. By the beginning of 2015, IHS Screen Digest expects online content share of total spend to rise to 17 per cent, and that including subscription spending this will rise to 28 per cent of total spending on the consoles. It is clear that online channels for distribution will become increasingly important to content owners looking to connect with gamers on these consoles, and that these channels will provide a significant and welcome amount of incremental revenue.

There are signs that digital distribution of triple-A retail-equivalent titles is making a comeback, which may see download sales outstrip our forecasts for the platforms. Early in the cycle, Sony embraced the idea of digital downloads for high-profile releases but subsequently retreated

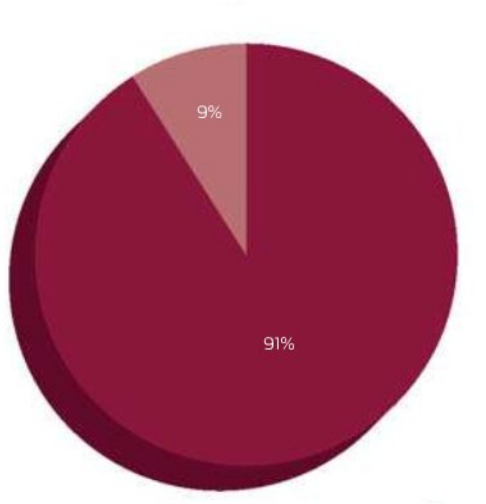




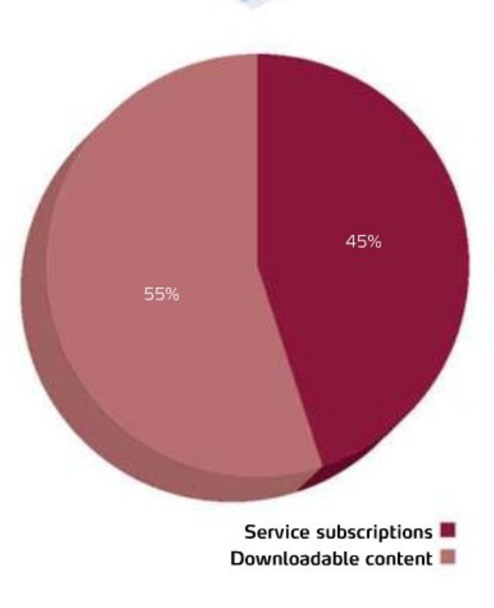
Battlefield 1943 (above centre), available on XBLA and PSN, was the top-selling Xbox Live Arcade game of 2009. Wii and DSiWare game *Cave Story* (above) is a development of the PC original

from the position due to retailer pressure. Now, with the simultaneous release of *Mass Effect 2* (noting of course that this came months after an exclusive release on the Xbox 360) and with resultant strong digital sales, I expect the platforms to push for more high-profile packaged-equivalent titles for download as this generation of consoles wears on.

Share of spending by channel across Xbox 360, PS3 and Wii, 2010



Share of console digital spending by type, 2010



Source: IHS Screen Digest, 2011

SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

After the tsunami

Despite the tragedy and ongoing threat, Christophe Kagotani describes an industry shaken but not broken



Right now, there's really only one thing about Japan. People have lost loved ones. People have lost everything. People are putting their lives on the line to try to right what has gone so terribly wrong in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami. My thoughts are with them. In fact, it's hard to think about anything else.

From the corner of my small table in a Kyoto Starbucks, I'm writing this on an iPad with great difficulty. I am still suffering from the aftershocks of the earthquake we suffered on March 11 – not real aftershocks, but imagined. Like many people in Tokyo, I still have this sensation that the world is shaking around me. Sometimes, I even need to sit down, or seek verification that the earth remains still: a glass of water or something hanging from a ceiling. The continuing nightmare at the Fukushima nuclear power plant is never far from my mind, or from my mobile phone's video feed.

In fact, technology has underpinned our response to the quake, both personally and nationally. We are in the social networking age; people can broadcast their feelings and status in realtime. Post-disaster, they rushed to react online via computers and mobiles, saying prayers for the huge losses in the north or letting their friends and family know they were OK. Google's crisis-response project provided a global noticeboard through which separated families could seek missing members. The game industry had a rapid and generous response to the disaster as well. Companies – even those which weren't in great financial shape – committed large donations, dwarfing the donation of the popular and wealthy professional baseball association.

Crises test people. Through our decision-making we reveal our priorities, leadership and humanity. There could not be a worse crisis than now – and the Japanese game industry has so far been exemplary, donating so much at a time when things look bleakest for its business. It has been forced to go into a semi-stasis: travel is extremely difficult, and although many developers have been allowed to stay at home and continue to work remotely (power outages permitting), manufacturing discs and transporting them has been a much larger challenge. Many games have had to reschedule their launches – and some have been cancelled entirely because their content was deemed too sensitive.

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And, let's face it, the buying public have certainly more important things than electronic entertainment to think about now, and for many months to come – even those games that do make it to market will not be able to sell the numbers that they might need. Only a few months ago, some companies were looking at the void of

March and April as a business opportunity! The massive rescheduling of line-ups at this critical time, the end of the fiscal year, will represent a devastating blow to the weaker publishers and studios. The Japanese industry post-disaster may be a very different one.

It might not even be located in the same place. As the authorities warned about the 70 per cent probability of a level-seven quake in the Kanto region (which encompasses Tokyo) and as two explosions were confirmed at the Fukushima plant, people had to make some difficult choices. I personally decided to flee Kanto for Kyoto: with our firstborn on the way, I'm not going to take any chances. It's not an easy move as we still have our families in Kanto, not to mention many friends and colleagues. Though I hope the nuclear crisis will be solved one way or another, it's unclear if it will mean life as usual in the Kanto region. The impact of radioactivity over time is not a very inviting prospect, especially when you have children, and it will take time before the clear facts about the level of threat emerge. Does that mean the industry will relocate to Osaka? It must be a possibility in the minds of some executives.

In the meantime, you have to hope that the development companies continue to behave responsibly and balance the needs of their business against their employees' safety. In general, those in charge of these businesses are moral creatures, but in the many years I have worked in the industry, I have crossed paths with less scrupulous types, and I worry that, in such critical circumstances as we face, ruthless business acumen might prove rather more dangerous to those lower down the ladder.

Maybe, in a few months, we can all go back to Tokyo and regain a sense of normality. I'd like to be told I overreacted. I'd like to restart my life from the moment it was paused. An old woman appears on the small screen of my mobile phone as it streams TV news. "We rebuilt a country that was in complete ruins after the war," she says. "We will do it again." Her husband adds: "And we rebuilt for the better – maybe this time something similar will happen." With a curtain of uncertainty in front of us, I can only hope so.


Dynasty Warriors 7


Nintendogs + Cats

Mediacreate Japanese sales, March 14–21

Game/weekly sales/lifetime sales

1. ***Dynasty Warriors 7*** (Tecmo Koei, PSP) 67,475 (320,565)
2. ***Dissidia Duodecim Final Fantasy*** (Square Enix, PSP) 31,058 (382,171)
3. ***Professor Layton And The Miracle Mask*** (Level-5, 3DS) 18,470 (226,355)
4. ***Phantasy Star Portable 2 Infinity*** (Sega, PSP) 16,175 (286,014)
5. ***Monster Hunter Portable 3rd*** (Capcom, PSP) 14,773 (4,385,209)
6. ***Nintendogs + Cats*** (Nintendo, 3DS) 14,726 (147,523)
7. ***SD Gundam G Generation World*** (Namco Bandai, PSP) 14,263 (273,643)
8. ***Way Of The Samurai 4*** (Spike, PS3) 13,807 (101,330)
9. ***Powerful Golf*** (Konami, DS) 10,125 (NE)
10. ***Hanaoni Koi Hajimeru Kaku Eikyuu No In*** (Idea Factory, PSP) 10,021 (NE)



MORTAL KOMBAT
"...THE MOST BADASS VIDEOGAME TO EVER EXIST."
IGN
"BRUTALLY BRILLIANT"
MAXIM
XBOX 360
MORTAL KOMBAT
PS3
MORTAL KOMBAT
18
UNLEASH
SCORPION'S VENGENCE
NOW ON YOUR IPHONE
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TO WATCH THE VIDEO
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XBOX 360.
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Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Beyond Good And Evil 2



There's been barely a whiff of pig since Ubidays 2008. Here's hoping sales of the first game's HD refurb convince Ubisoft to put both trotters into making the sequel.
TBA, UBISOFT

Fez

With indie dev Phil Fish's much-touted, much-delayed platformer playable at PAX East, we'll undoubtedly soon discover if this spatial puzzler can out-pseud *Braid*.
360, POLYTRON, TRAPDOOR

Mass Effect 3



Our anticipation has been stoked by the DLC swansong to the second game. But will the third instalment finally allow us to investigate Legion's romantic I/O functionality?
360, PC, PS3, EA

Goth but not forgotten

Will gaming's tortured heroes finally whisper goodbye?



Thanks to Tim Burton, there was a time when you couldn't move for 'dark reimaginings', replete with comic-Halloween kookiness and trees shaped like question marks. Have games since shed their adolescent angst?

We should all be familiar with the accusation that gaming is an adolescent medium. And while the structure of games speaks to an ageless audience, it's hard to deny that, at least aesthetically, the majority of titles stall somewhere before full maturity – either locked to the naïve neons and pastels of cheery childhood pursuits, or engaged in the pubescent histrionics which occur when children first become profoundly aware of the universe's profound indifference to them.

It's happened to other media: as comics' persisting heroes struggled with the changing identity of their audience in the '90s, countless caped crusaders sank to their knees, wailing "Nooo!" at a glowering sky. Frank Miller's grim recasting of Batman as a vengeful, tormented wraith resonates to this day, but most of the '90s navel-gazing, lank-haired icons (hello, The Crow) have been rolled up and stuffed back in their poster tubes.

Has gaming also begun to shed its own introspective whiners? *American McGee's Alice*, released in 2000, was a child of the '90s' hysterical wrist-slashing bleakness. *Alice*'s sequel is slightly less derivative fare, with a more exotic cast and characterisation, paying heed to the intervening decade's succession of horror tropes.

Similarly, *Arkham City*'s Batman distances himself from both '90s angst and the recent films' shift to a more credible universe. The cast of villains here is as lurid as ever, and Batman himself is businesslike, letting his fists do the complaining. Then there's *Prey* – the first game's hero Tommy has been let go in favour of a largely silent narrator, who keeps his problems to himself.

The Darkness, however, looks to revel in its goth-gangster-noir shtick, and further play is required to verify whether *Gears Of War* has developed an emotional palette beyond "Hoo-rah!" and "Nooo!"

We can't say we'd be sorry to see angst go. While complex characters facing difficult situations are welcome, the grating immaturity of gaming's 'troubled' personalities seems conspicuously more childish than the child-like joy inspired by Mario and his ilk. Perhaps Mario's endless novelty genuinely does recreate the awe of youth, whereas the emotional engagement asked by gaming's more morose protagonists tends to leave eyes rolling, rather than wide with wonder.

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **DICE**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **Q4 2011**

Battlefield 3

DICE provides its vision of the future of the sound and the fury

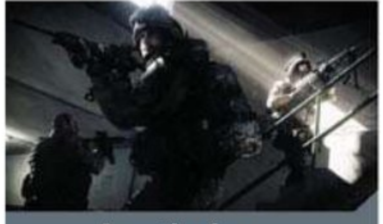
If looks and sound were everything, *Battlefield 3,* unveiled in the form of a realtime demo at GDC, is truly the next generation of shooters. For atmosphere, verisimilitude, detail and experiential drama, there's nothing else quite like it. A big part of it is the lighting: subtle atmospherics, bright, blinding sunlight and dappled shadow as the player's squad hauls ass from the safety of its APC into the streets of a Middle Eastern city, and then down a stall-lined alleyway. It's also down to the audio, from the bored Generation Kill banter and Johnny Cash inside the APC to the raw din of the city: a call to prayer, the roar of traffic and haggling. DICE has always excelled at the twin arts of audio and image, but has surpassed itself here, and to awesome effect: this is a place, and your squadmates are people.

The prior true *Battlefield* came out in 2005, but like its predecessors was a straight multiplayer game. Now, having put out two releases of offshoot *Bad Company*, DICE's sandbox-based blend of fanciful storytelling and military realism, *Battlefield 3* marks the first time the core series has featured a singleplayer campaign. All, surely, to meaningfully challenge *Call Of Duty*'s hegemony. The plan is "to push the online shooter" with "full blockbuster values".

Core to achieving this is a new engine, Frostbite 2, which among other things combines Geomerics' leading-edge lighting engine with *FIFA*'s ANT animation system, which effortlessly blends actions so the soldiers move cogently. These are combined with a dynamic damage system which means pretty much anything can be destroyed. We see a demo of a shockwave that ripples and cracks the tarmac of a road, all part of an intention for players to "feel the battle". "Our goal is to make sure that, since your character is carrying around heavy weaponry, those weapons will have an accurate effect on the world around you," DICE executive producer **Patrick Bach** tells us, but he's keen to emphasise *Battlefield 3*'s main aim: "It's not a physics simulation in any way – it's a game first."

The squad's objective is to find a patrol of marines that's gone missing, an everyday task for these grunts. As they progress into a building, a tremor – from explosives or a quake? – showers a stairwell with dust from the concrete ceiling and dislodges a fluorescent strip light, sending its greenish glare swinging crazily. The interiors display the quality of Frostbite 2's lighting, which excels at indirect luminescence.

The attack begins as the squad emerges from a garage into a dusty parking area. It's loud and furious, but it's hard not to feel throughout the demo that the enemy soldiers behave like little more than pop-up heads. As such, *Battlefield 3* seems closer in ethos to the scripted shooting galleries of *Call Of Duty* than the open fields of *Bad Company*. "We don't like the whole trigger-based respawn functionality of



Appetite for destruction

Bach and his team at DICE are well aware of the challenge of providing players with the means of destruction. "That's our biggest challenge, because you don't want the player to craft their own game, because then there's no point to us making a storyline at all," he says. Some buildings can be razed, while others will maintain the spatial order necessary for the player to traverse. And that's all quite apart from the technical challenge. Bach tells us that it takes a supercomputer to model bullet impacts that look properly realistic. Though some elements will break according to the bullet's angle, he concedes: "Our goal is that it looks cool when it breaks, so we are predefining a lot of stuff to make it crumble in the right way."





The animation of head motion as the player exits the APC grounds the action in the character's body, an effect used throughout the demo that's surely a result of the steps made by *Mirror's Edge* toward making firstperson feel physical







A shootout sequence in a car park doesn't give much indication that enemy AI is up to much, with soldiers running into position behind cars and popping up and down to take potshots at the player

"Destruction for destruction's sake doesn't make a great game," Bach tells us. "The goal for destruction is not to create a physics simulation; for us it's another dimension to add to the gameplay for a more dynamic experience"

The 5.1 audio design makes even a run-of-the-mill shootout disorientating and threatening, the loud, dull echo of gunfire and the shouts from your men enveloping the player fully

some shooters," maintains Bach. "We see a fight as something you get into, you read the situation, you take care of the situation and you try to move on."

But isn't the scripted singleplayer game a step back for the FPS? "I don't see it as an absolute goal for all games to be sandbox games," counters Bach, who is keen to underscore that *Battlefield 3* will ship with its version of the series' classic large-scale multiplayer for those after a more open play experience. "We've been building sandbox games for quite some time and we've got pretty good at it, but I don't see that as the only way of building games, because then we wouldn't build campaigns at all. In some cases they aren't, but in most cases sandbox games are hardcore, boring, hard to get into and they are not very popular."

But whether or not the AI in the demo is representative of the final game, DICE has its work cut out. "Just the fact that the environment can change dynamically creates a huge challenge for us when it comes to AI," says Bach. "[It] puts a lot of challenges to our AI code when it comes to finding new cover, reacting to the fact that it has disappeared, moving and flanking based on the new situation."

The demo jumps ahead to a tense sniper battle on the flat roof of a building. Incoming shots blur the air as if the player's been hit, accentuating the power of the high-velocity bullets even more effectively than their ability to crack apart the roof's low parapet. The ANT system is clearly evident: the squad's crawl in cover is more convincing than we've ever seen. As the rest of the squad provides covering fire, the player takes up an RPG, which destroys most of the sniper's building.

The remainder of the demo hits all of the notes sought by today's massmarket shooter fan. There's a tense sequence in which the player navigates a twisting basement to defuse a bomb and engages an enemy in a QTE-driven fistfight, and there's a large street battle providing vehicle turret sections and the spectacle of helicopter miniguns tearing into enemies, which ends with an entire building coming down, a wall of dust blanking the image. It's intense – visually, aurally and dramatically – and it's pretty safe to say that no games have achieved such a level of physicality in firstperson before. That all of this is underpinned by a game that seems slavishly close to today's standards is a pity. Despite DICE's prior achievements in the field, it seems a more conservative approach is key to safely stepping into the future.

> "We've been building sandbox games for quite some time and we've got pretty good at it, but I don't see that as the only way of building games"

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **WARNER BROS**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTEADY**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER 21**

Batman: Arkham City

A whole city of criminals awaits punishment from the darkness



Though the villains are more plentiful and involved, the star of the show is still very much Batman himself, his new abilities and attacks appropriately brutal (see 'Fight knight')

On a rooftop many storeys above the streets of Gotham, a caped figure surveys the dense skyline. Rockksteady Studios could hardly have chosen a more iconic image to open its second Batman adventure – but this early moment is also symbolic of a major design shift. "Pretty much 80 per cent of the first game took place in rooms and hallways," admits the studio's marketing manager, **Dax Ginn**, during a walkthrough of the first chapter. "It was very intense, very atmospheric, but there was no opportunity to just break out and make decisions about where you wanted to go. When we started *Arkham City*, we wanted to give players the power and authority of Batman, and with that comes the ability to pursue your own objectives at your own pace."

The action takes place in Arkham City, a slum area of Gotham annexed by the city's new mayor Quincy Sharp and turned into a giant prison. Within its walls, Two-Face has kidnapped Catwoman and is set to execute her as a crude PR stunt in order to garner a new bunch of criminal acolytes. Batman must make his way to the crumbling courthouse building where Dent is presenting his murderous case for the prosecution.

However, between your opening position and the mission objective, there's a dense cityscape to explore. Rocksteady has pointed out that this is not a truly open-world environment, and exploration will be managed, but Batman is able to swoop down and glide above the city streets as he pleases within a limited area. Players maintain full aerial control while gliding, using a new dive move to gain acceleration, before landing on roofs or perching on billboards. Around you is a dark mass of gothic skyscrapers, crumbling tenements and blinking neon signs, with distant searchlights strafing the night sky.

There's also an interesting way to cover larger distances: the skies above Arkham City are routinely patrolled by security helicopters, and Batman is able to use his grappling gun to hitch a ride. From here, Detective Mode can be used to pick out areas of interesting activity – thugs guarding a building in the distance, an armed gang hassling a weaker crook in an alley far below.

These all represent mini-missions for the Dark Knight, either building toward the main plot line or revealing side stories and minor objectives. Early on, we rescue journalist Jack Ryder from a bunch of thugs, one of whom is a Riddler informant. Avoid knocking him out with the rest and he'll reveal the



Though Batman now packs more jaw-smashing moves, stealth is still likely to be a key ingredient for successfully taking down patrols and gangs in Arkham's shadows



Detective Mode is more nuanced and effective than before. This time it highlights important details, both near and far, without muddying your view

whereabouts of several Riddler trophies hidden around the city – this new combo of identification and interrogation adds complexity to fight sequences. It's not just about cracking skulls.

"There's a lot of dialogue in the game," says Ginn. "If you listen to it, you learn a lot more about what's happening politically, the power struggle within the city." Indeed, listening is important. Players can use an updated version of the first game's cryptographic sequencer to hack into communications around the prison – for example, to eavesdrop on chatter between City warden Hugo Strange and the Tygers, his paramilitary police force. Furthermore, there's a surveillance system that picks up nearby conversations, again providing clues and snippets regarding the main story and side quests.

Key tactical elements have been retained from the first game. Batman's assault on the courthouse involves scanning the building with a more discreet version of the familiar Detective Mode, which now highlights and augments pertinent details rather than

It's not a truly open-world environment, and exploration will be managed, but Batman is able to swoop down and glide above the city streets as he pleases within a limited area

overlays the entire scene with a sparse computerised display. It's a neat compromise, and it lets us quickly work out which criminals have the most dangerous weapons, so they can be dropped first. A mass brawl on the courtroom floor shows off both the sequel's capacity for larger groups of enemies and the lead character's newly doubled animation roster, with Batman elbowing, kneeing and punching incoming combatants via a range of fluid movements.

Later, when Dent is captured and Catwoman is released, the Joker attempts to take her out with a sniper rifle positioned in a nearby bell tower, providing the first chance to see the forensics feature back in action. Batman works out the trajectory of the bullet and therefore its source, leading to the next stage in the chapter. In the church, he's confronted by Harley Quinn, who posts four henchmen to guard him. It's time for a new gadget, smoke pellets; Batman throws one at the floor, aims the grappling hook at a handy gargoyle above and disappears through the mist. It's another hint that combat will be even more measured, more thoughtful, than it was in the original.

In the background, an intriguing conspiracy is forming. Catwoman informs us that Hugo Strange may be in an alliance with the Joker. While the sickly super-villain remains an elusive presence, his bucolic laugh is the last we hear of him in this sequence. There are other enemies to be revealed, and it will be fascinating to see how Strange emerges as the key antagonist – mad, in charge of a private army and knowledgeable about Batman's true identity. But then, a game that promises to combine Alan Moore's The Killing Joke with Escape From New York was never going to be dull.



Fight knight

Batman can call on two key new attack options. The power dive lets him swoop down at an enemy and seamlessly transfer from landing into an attack move – a great way to open up an assault on a group of targets. Against more skilled or heavily armoured enemies, there's the new Beatdown option accessed on the 360 controller by hitting B and X. This move starts out with a cape stun, before moving on into a series of pummelling jabs, followed by an uppercut.

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JUNE**

Shadows Of The Damned

Demons' pubes. Life-affirming tequila. Harmonicas. Garcia Hotspur's going to Hell





Though you don't have piles of ammunition at your disposal, you won't need to conserve them anything like as carefully as in *Resident Evil* – the threat instead is instigated by the crowding of enemies and the danger of being in the dark

What would you hope for in a game made by Suda51 and Shinji Mikami? You're thinking of a dizzyingly surreal hyper-violent adventure, right? Mechanically and structurally novel, forged by Suda51's imagination, but perfectly honed by Mikami's attention to detail? That's what we're after. And *Shadows Of The Damned* is, well, mostly that game. But as much as its profane posturing and demented setting might seem to confirm the former set of assumptions, they cover an actually rather conventional shooter.

At the heart of this thirdperson adventure, after all, lies *Resident Evil 5*: aiming triggers the classic over-the-shoulder view, while the fruitily named Garcia Hotspur can still move. But instead of *RE5*'s steady crosshair, *Shadows*' currently snaps to targets during battles that are more chaotic than those instigated by the crush of Majini.

They're the result of a combination of *Shadows*' deranged bestiary of ghouls and demons and a convoluted set of mechanics, at the centre of which lies the concept of light and darkness. Enemies are invincible in the darkness, which is indicated by a blue, shadowy tint and your energy bar continually ticking down. To return to the light, you must locate and destroy a golden wall-mounted bust of a goat, which strains and gurns in place, by shooting it with your light gun. The light gun, fired with a tap of RB rather than the usual trigger, is part of a yin-yang system of switching between light and standard weaponry to get Hotspur's job done, which apart from demon-slaying is to save his girlfriend, Paula, from the clutches of her mysterious kidnapper, Fleming, who's taken her to Hell.

Even when you've switched an area back to the light, enemies will still carry the darkness until you've hit them with a light shot; only then are they susceptible to conventional ordnance. Hotspur has four guns at his disposal – a pistol, shotgun, SMG and grenade launcher – each styled with skulls and bones and colour-coded for clarity, as well as a melee attack which knocks enemies back with a press of B, but can be charged for greater impact.

Achieving headshots and critical hits quickly clears areas, which are less *Resident Evil*'s open combat arenas than tightly designed blends of battle gauntlets and puzzle challenges. 'Demon pube gates', for instance, open only when you shoot out their magical panel in darkness with your standard weaponry, meaning that you must willingly enter the murk to progress. Some areas become flooded by a slowly rising tide of darkness, which spews from giant stone hands, leading to scenarios in which you must wait for the area to be filled before you duck in, avoiding enemies, to open the gate and run as fast as possible. The aim of the darkness is to panic and unnerve you, contrasting your mastery of the light with your vulnerability outside of it by asking you to find the goat bust that will send you back into safety.

> We follow a blood-soaked, skull-faced man through the streets. He has a harmonica jammed into his maw, causing his laugh to come out as a discordant wheeze

Yes, it's a colourful production. Hotspur has an English-accented skull sidekick called Johnson, who looks and talks a lot like *Planescape: Torment*'s Morte, and is faced by a gruesomely colourful cast. Throughout the level we play, the game playfully foreshadows threats. A boss, an opera singer, causes a small earthquake with her voice minutes before we meet her in a square before a porticoed opera house ('Welcome to Hell' is written in neon across its frontage), but her aria is actually a prelude to an attack by a demon with rotating blades for arms, a habit of switching into darkness, and a large red jewel of a weak point on its back.

We later follow a blood-soaked, skull-



Good mixer

You won't be surprised to learn that *Shadows* subverts action game standards, if only by name, with Hotspur guzzling tequila and other spirits to recoup life; it all works the same as ever. Elsewhere, the game refines the *RE5* template, with the items and ammo dispensed by boxes and on shooting barrels being automatically collected when you near them. And instead of browsing a gun shop, you merely upgrade the four standard weapons' firepower, shot frequency, reload times and so on using gems won through exploration and combat.





Some gates are governed by the squashed faces of demonic cherubim, which gurningly demand a certain object – a heart, an eyeball perhaps – to eat before they'll open the way





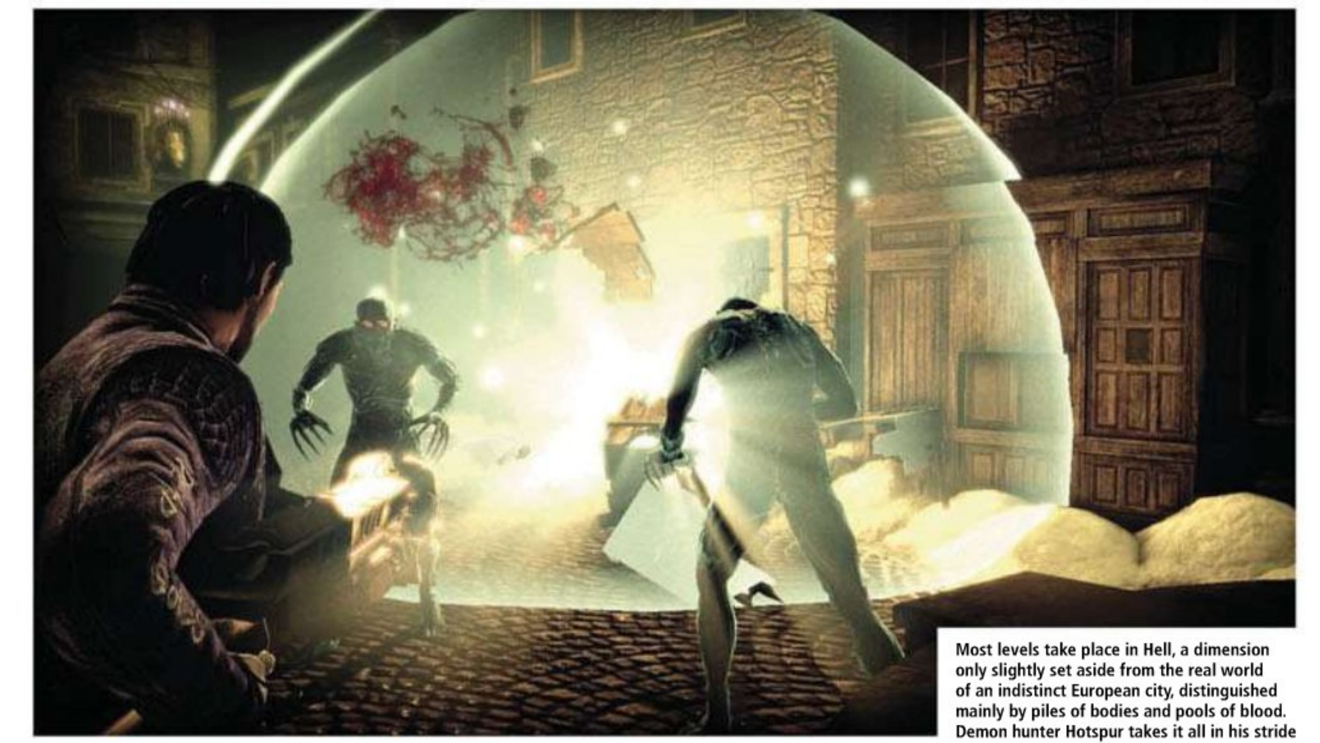
faced man through the streets of the level's Italian-styled city. He has a harmonica jammed into his maw, causing his laugh to come out as a discordant wheeze. The game, we're told, will explain why, along with the backstories of the other characters that have been damned. His entrance for the demo's final encounter is certainly memorable – Hotspur hears Paula calling, chases and finds her (she's dressed in a negligee, naturally) collapsed on a street stall. He rushes to her side, only to witness her flopping on to the ground, performing an Exorcist-style scream, rolling her eyes up and pulling her own head off. "Well, that killed my stiffy," says Johnson. Only compounding matters, the skull-faced man then bursts out of her still-standing body. "Demons are like men," observes Johnson. "They all try to get inside the prettiest girl."

Suda51 and Mikami describe *Shadows Of The Damned* as a punk-rock take on grindhouse. And it's extremely funny, too. But beneath that veneer, the game's roots lie firmly in the titles for which its creators are famous. That's comforting, and a suggestion that the game won't unload any nasty surprises on its players when it's released – except the sort of nasty surprises they want – though it doesn't look like *Shadows* will provide much of a revolution. But, on the other hand, revolutions rarely have such a pervading sense of fun.





The loading screens are charming, depicting a paper cutout of Hotspur walking to the next location. They contrast with the hard-boiled design of the main game (above), which blends Suda's imagination with Mikami's grit



Most levels take place in Hell, a dimension only slightly set aside from the real world of an indistinct European city, distinguished mainly by piles of bodies and pools of blood. Demon hunter Hotspur takes it all in his stride

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **2K**
DEVELOPER: **DIGITAL EXTREMES**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **TBA**

The Darkness II

It's good to be back in those mayhem-loving demon arms again



Unbearable lightness

If Sam Fisher were a vampire, he would still be less averse to the light than you are when manifesting *The Darkness*. Even the simple act of walking under a fluorescent light can sap you of your powers, forcing you into a sluggish crawl and triggering a high-pitched ringing in your ears. You can always do the *Splinter Cell* trick of shooting out lights, but it's often easiest to just slink through the shadowy corners of the map whenever possible. In our demo the light didn't appear to be a mortal threat, or diminish health, but you'll avoid it because that ear-ringing audio cue could leave even the sanest mafia boss clawing at his skin with annoyance.

Set two years after the events of the previous game, *The Darkness II* once again hinges on the exploits of anti-hero Jackie Estacado, who has since become don of the Estacado crime family. Despite his newfound position of influence, he remains a captive host of the demonic presence that once forced him to look on helplessly as mafia thugs executed his girlfriend, Jenny. The Darkness feeds off Estacado's lust for vengeance, lending him superhuman powers with which to slaughter his enemies. However, when it comes to The Darkness's appetite, killing is merely a starter. For dessert? The snarling, piranha-headed demon tentacles jutting from Estacado's shoulder blades gobble the heart out of his victim's chest – a grisly flourish, even by contemporary videogame standards.

Given the destructive power conferred by Estacado's parasite, it's hardly surprising when our demo opens with some jealous rogue trying to steal it. This nameless villain, whose burn-scarred face recalls Freddy Krueger, urges Estacado to surrender The Darkness. The man's menacing calm and his henchman's deviant quip about liking the stickiness of Estacado's blood aim to leave players shifting queasily in their chairs. Over Estacado's opening narration – "Don't take The Darkness lightly," he exhorts us via returning writer Paul Jenkins – the clank of iron striking iron rings out at eerie intervals, like a tolling bell.

Shifting to Estacado's firstperson perspective at the moment he regains consciousness, you peer down the length of your left arm to where a thick metal spike is being hammered through your palm and deep into a wooden crossbeam. One of the things that makes Estacado such an engaging protagonist is the juxtaposition of his sympathetic qualities – unswerving devotion to the memory of his murdered lover – with his explicitly devilish ones. Opening the game with a demon-puppeted mafia boss being nailed to a cross is the stuff of death-metal album cover legend, and it italicises Estacado's conflicted morality.



The demon arms allow players to perform executions on opponents, such as hoisting an enemy aloft with your left tentacle and impaling his chest cavity with the right

> The girls' flirty giggling halts abruptly when a bullet bursts through the window and straight through one of their heads, sending her pitching face first into the table

The interrogator's hired muscle slaps Estacado across the face after being instructed to "keep him focused". All the while, tendrils of ethereal purple energy stretch from Estacado to four metallic podiums that appear to be siphoning The Darkness out of his body. Shortly after Estacado claims to recognise his interrogator – "You're that crippled fuck from the restaurant!" – the game flashes back to the Italian restaurant in question. What would a mafia story be, after all, without an Italian restaurant? Just pasta without the marinara.

In contrast to the dim warehouse interior of the previous scene, the restaurant's saturated red fabrics burst off the screen. Digital Extremes' project director **Sheldon Carter** chimes in briefly to point out the high-contrast lighting and hand-painted textures: "We really want it to feel like when you're playing this game, you're playing a graphic novel." *The Darkness II*'s cel-shaded treatment doesn't announce itself quite as loudly as games such as *The Wind Waker* or *Borderlands*. What you get instead is a tasteful balance of realism and impressionism – a welcome departure from the previous game's unrelenting corpse-like pallor.

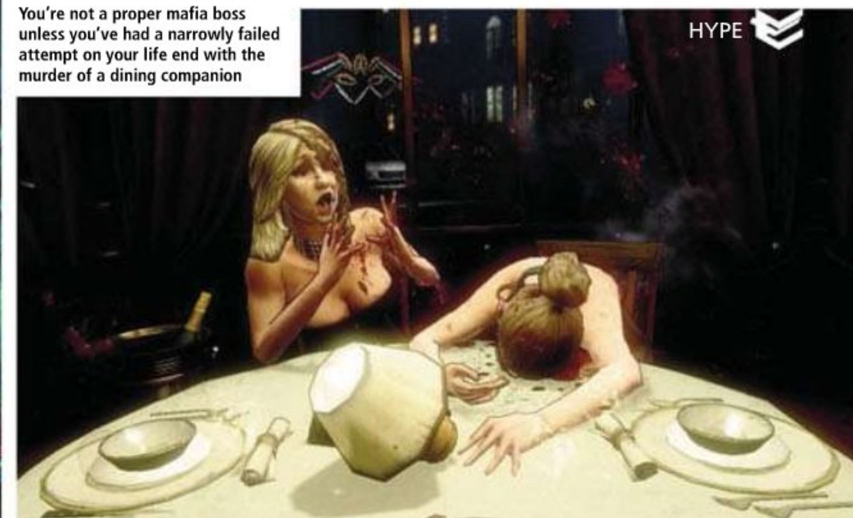
Taking over development duties from Starbreeze Studios is Canadian developer Digital Extremes, best known for its work on the *Unreal Tournament* franchise and, more recently, the PS3 port of *BioShock* and the multiplayer mode for *BioShock 2*. Just like in the world of Rapture, there's a conscious effort being made to leave as much control as possible in the hands of the player, even as story events unfold. The restaurant portion of the demo illustrates such unbroken immersion quite effectively.

Your chatty Italian-American subordinate Vinnie leads you through the restaurant to "your usual table", which, given your role as the head of a powerful mob family, is bafflingly situated directly beside a road-facing window. Sinatra's crooning drifts from the loudspeakers. Already seated at the



***The Darkness II*'s main gameplay loop is about alternating your killing between both typical shooter weapons and the exaggerated violence produced by your demonic arms. Only play will define their merits beyond the spectacle**





You're not a proper mafia boss unless you've had a narrowly failed attempt on your life end with the murder of a dining companion







The tentacle-like demon arms exhibit far more texture and personality than the ones featured in the original game. The artists at Digital Extremes have given subtle distinguishing physical features to each individual arm to set them apart

table, a pair of platinum-blonde, off-duty strippers from The Candy Club ask if you remember them from the previous night. They tilt ever so slightly forward in their chairs, confident their décolletages will jog your memory. "Sorry, ladies," you respond. "Didn't recognise you with your clothes on." The girls' flirty giggling halts abruptly when a bullet bursts through the window and straight through one of their heads, sending her pitching face first into the table, narrowly missing its intended target.

Chaos erupts. The restaurant morphs into a hell-like inferno. Patrons stumble around ablaze, shrieking. A woman who just a few moments ago could be heard complaining about the spiciness of her ravioli is too shock-stricken to bemoan this new burning sensation. The harrowing voice of The Darkness – once again provided by Mike Patton – growls at you to get to the dark. Bad guys in orange jumpsuits pour into the restaurant to finish off their target. Vinnie shoves a gun in your hands and then proceeds to drag you out back, since your leg has been badly injured. A creatively disguised rail-shooting sequence ensues, as you fire away, watching your bloody leg dragging along the floor, leaving a streaky red trail behind you.

Once you get out of the restaurant into the dark back alley, The Darkness makes its full presence known, sprouting its tentacled demon arms and healing your injured leg so you can escape on foot. Players can now use the left demon arm to grab enemies and objects in the environment. Need a makeshift riot shield? Use the left demon arm to snatch a car door. Or just pluck a parking meter out of the asphalt and fling it through someone's torso like a javelin. The right demon arm's slashing ability enables a variety of execution moves. One move dubbed The Anaconda involves grabbing an enemy with the left arm, hoisting him up into the air and running the right demon arm through his back and out of his chest cavity. In case you prefer dispatching foes in a more straightforward manner, there's the familiar arsenal of uzis, shotguns, handguns and more, just waiting to be unleashed on people. The Darkling character from the first game has been brought back and imbued with more personality, making him an occasional sidekick. As you turn one corner in a subway section, you find him wearing a furry hat and Union Flag dress, gleefully urinating on one of the bad guys you've just killed. In a game all about darkness, apparently even the comic relief must be raven black.



High-contrast scenes, such as this subway platform sequence, help you avoid power-sapping light sources, but it's never too dark to see clearly



Kingdoms Of Amalur: Reckoning

Ex-Bethesda designers spawn a game that strikes straight at the heart of the RPG

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **38 STUDIOS/ BIG HUGE GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

It might have the prestige of having been founded by Curt Schilling, a Major League Baseball pitcher, but for the debut of 38 Studios' first game, the team clearly wishes to emphasise its heritage. After all, it includes lead designers **Mark Nelson** and Ken Rolston, Bethesda stalwarts who worked on *Morrowind*, *Fallout 3* and *Oblivion*; Todd MacFarlane, the illustrator who created Spawn and now the studio's art director; and fantasy author RA Salvatore.

Other than the use of a typeface suspiciously similar to *Oblivion*'s and a familiar character creation system (though laudably free of the tendency to make every face look like a potato), this singleplayer action-RPG bears little resemblance to its principals' previous work. Not that it's particularly original – the visual style crosses *Fable*'s dreamy glow with *World Of Warcraft*'s ornate mythology. And though it's ostensibly set in an open environment in which the hero can wander anywhere, the routes our demonstrator takes in our live playthrough look more funnelled than a typical Bethesda sweeping landscape.

A crafting system allows players to create and socket jewels to weapons – so socketing a fire jewel to a longsword creates a flaming longsword. Smart refinements of RPG basics include the looting system, which is designed to keep you out of the inventory by immediately comparing equipped items and presenting shortcuts to drop, add to a junk pile or equip

Rolling a new character is both more complex and more thoughtful than you'd find in an *Elder Scrolls* game. The game's four races give differentiated bonuses to non-combat skills, while a patron god adds a few more. But you don't choose a class, which is only set through your choices on an ability tree, spread across sorcery, might and finesse. "It's an uninformed choice when you're starting a game," says Nelson, explaining how you can mix abilities across the three trees to create such hybrid classes as battlemages and spellswords.

The game itself opens out in the Well of Souls, where your dead body has been deposited in order for a group of gnomes to try and resurrect it. It turns out that you are their first successful subject – which would explain why you have to fight your way through the well's dingy denizens in order to get to safety.

It's here that *Reckoning* reveals inspiration from the likes of *God Of War*. Weapons are mapped to just one face button, with the ability to launch enemies into the air and juggle them, pull, dodge and perform finishing moves. But Nelson is adamant about what kind of game this is: "We've taken lots of inspiration from action games, but there's a real RPG backbone to everything." In other words, you can play as skillfully as you want, but the statistics will always even your chances out. The demonstrator fights unarmed, showing how counters are possible through blocking. "We're not asking RPG players to be action players," says Nelson, but he still wants you to master the combat system.



The environments look much like *Fable*'s, and are designed similarly, too, leading players via subtle paths to locations. With the world not levelled according to the character, though, environments will give clues as to the level of creatures to expect

The world itself is studded with quest-givers with *WOW*-style exclamation marks over their heads, towns with shops and dungeons, and a day-night cycle has implications on quests. "We're not a simulation but we want it to feel like a living breathing place," says Nelson, but we suspect *Reckoning* won't boast the depth of Bethesda's Radiant AI. Instead, Nelson says that the team has taken care to give every location and detail a background in lore.

But the quest we watch, which winds its way into the depths of a dungeon, has its emphasis decidedly on action rather than storytelling. That's no bad thing, but on the evidence of this apparently deftly created but thematically generic production it's hard to see at this point where the world-building talents of the ex-Bethesda team members, and MacFarlane's visual imagination, have truly been spent.



Brutal sorcery

Reckoning's clear strength is its combat, with the open class system allowing fighters to imbue their attacks with magic for plenty of extra colour, and allow mages to be brutal. Indeed, we witness a magic user tearing the heart out of an enemy, while his teleport move renders its grenade-throwing friends useless. If that weren't enough, he can also freeze enemies and pound a vast area with a meteor spell, all while wearing vast flaming gauntlets. A warrior can carry two weapons – we see one with a hammer and sword, each mapped to different buttons, the hammer able to unleash powerful quake magic. The importance of the combat system to *Reckoning* is exemplified by the quality of its camera system, which works well to keep the action onscreen.

We wonder what the point of turret bayonets is. Presumably, few foes would be inclined to run towards a mounted gun. But this is one of the *less* implausible bits of *Gears* weaponry





Female COGs join the roster for multiplayer in response to player requests. Female Locust players will feature in the game's Beast mode, which is Horde for the grubs





The new maps are Checkout, set in a disintegrating superstore, the sandstorm-blighted Trenches, a debris-littered Thrashball pitch, and an oddly picturesque village called Old Town, in which you can shoot chickens to bits

Gears Of War 3

As Epic revs up for its first ever multiplayer beta we sink our teeth into its new modes and maps

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **EPIC GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER 20**

Multiplayer betas, once works-in-progress, are now expected to be fully polished and fully functional demos – already so far along, as *Gears Of War 3*'s executive producer **Rod Fergusson** points out, that it's actually quite difficult for developers to get the feedback that they need in time for release. But with dedicated servers and four weeks of large-scale open testing, Epic is determined to avoid the teething problems that plagued *Gears Of War 2*. Open to *Bulletstorm: Epic Edition* purchasers from April 18, the full public beta runs from April 25 to May 15.

With its roll-dodging and close-quarters executions, *Gears Of War*'s multiplayer sometimes feels more like a brawler than a shooter – a unique distinction enhanced by new weapons like the sawn-off shotgun. It kills with one shot, but only when you're close enough to an opponent to pat them on the shoulder; fire the round too early and you're unlikely to survive the lengthy reload. The Retro Lancer, meanwhile, has a nasty-looking traditional bayonet jutting out below the barrel in place of the familiar chainsaw, inviting you to charge headlong at exposed adversaries. The maps are geared quite heavily towards close-range, confined combat, giving these new weapons (and the classic chainsaw-adorned Lancer) ample opportunity to show themselves off.

Other new weapons trade less on risk and reward and more on gory spectacle. The Digger Launcher sends its projectile burrowing underground in a straight line to explode beneath the feet of enemies, but at short range it burrows into the chest of an unfortunate opponent and explodes out of his head. The One-Shot is a super-powered long-range weapon that turns Locust into mist. Mortars, too, allow you to set yourself up in a high place and obliterate parts of the map from a distance, with a little aiming practice.

Each weapon – and each map – is especially suited to particular game modes. Straight-up slaughter contests send everyone running for the best close-up weapons, whereas mortars and the One-Shot are crucial to territory contests. Epic will roll out three multiplayer modes over the four-week course of the beta. A new twist on Team Deathmatch keeps the tension high, preventing five-on-five skirmishes from blurring together into an undefined stream of kills and deaths on a scoreboard. Each team has a limit of 15 respawns between them; once those are depleted, death is final, meaning that matches often end in tense four-versus-two or three-versus-one stand-offs.

Capture the Leader requires you to hold a nominated member of the opposing team hostage for 30 seconds to win a round – players anointed as the Leader can see enemy positions at the touch of a button, and the drama revolves around deciding whether to make an aggressive rush towards the opposition or keep your own captain well-protected. King Of The Hill is a fast-paced and particularly violent version of the classic territory contest. As in *Halo*'s Crazy King mode, the target area switches every minute or so, sending everyone dashing madly around the map towards concentrated chaos.

It says much that even without the Pavlovian trickle of experience points, level-ups and new weapon unlocks that have become a standard for FPS multiplayer, *Gears Of War 3*'s multiplayer is dangerously compulsive. Based on this evidence, those dedicated servers are going to be in high demand.



Beta bribery

Epic is offering a slew of specific rewards to tempt players towards its testing ground. As well as a Beta Tester medal, there are weapon and character skins for the most dedicated players: Thrashball Cole, a Cole variant in an American football-style costume, unlocks after 50 matches, and can be kept for the full game if used in ten more. A Gold-Plated Retro Lancer unlocks after 90 matches, and is permanently yours after 100 kills. A flaming animated skin for the Hammerburst, Lancer, sawn-off and Gnasher are also offered each week of the beta.



With so much of *Gears Of War 3*'s arsenal able to shred an opponent in an instant, we wonder if some of the game's principal tactics and pace will be lost in a shower of gibs

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **TEAM BONDI, ROCKSTAR**
ORIGIN: **AUSTRALIA, US**
RELEASE: **MAY 17 (US), MAY 20 (EU)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E213, E223**

LA Noire

Dead dames and dirty cops: we put the screws on the detective drama

An open-world detective game, Team Bondi's opus is a mysterious proposition. It steps back from the predominantly bullet-based interaction of other Rockstar-published titles, bolstering its noir fiction with complex clue-hunting and interrogation mechanics – sophisticated facial animation technology allowing players to sort facts from fibs while sweating a suspect. The game then weaves the episodic drama of individual cases into a larger story as protagonist Cole Phelps ascends the ranks of the '40s LAPD, wrestling with his moral compass and the politics of the department.

The question is how its cleverly conceived components fit together and feel in unison – will its action beats rub up awkwardly against its measured investigation mechanics? Bondi has clearly been ruminating on this very point. Earlier demonstrations which saw Phelps gun his way through a small army of baddies are not, it says, representative of the game's action. Instead, individual cases are given a much greater diversity of pulse-quickening moments than simple shootouts, and they are brief and small-scale, staying true to the grim noir fiction. Rumbled suspects may take a swing at you or simply flee, precipitating foot-chases or vehicle pursuits. Gunfights are rarer, deadly and brief – often involving a very small number of shooters: the falsity of commonplace videogame combat mechanics, like recharging health, will hopefully be somewhat concealed.

Our playthrough of a case from the homicide desk suggests Bondi has done well to cover the seams between the game's elements – not least by asserting a tremendously powerful aesthetic through the meticulous detail of its open world. There is none of the humour that typifies the *GTA* series – and *LA Noire* pulls few punches in depicting the genuine horror of crime. The mangled, naked corpse of a girl – perhaps a victim of the (real-life) Black Dahlia killer – is presented with little compromise to delicate sensibilities. The girl's modesty is spared by limiting Phelps' examination of the corpse to the waist up – presumably to avert tabloid-baiting YouTube atrocities down the line.

Sparse, brooding jazz plays until you've found all the clues at a crime scene, and audio cues and controller vibrations help point out evidence. We relied on these to identify interactive items: with the camera pulled back into thirdperson, spotting and interpreting relevant clues is more than a matter of sharp eyesight. But overlook something vital and other police workers eventually mark it out with a yellow evidence tag. Your partner, who is also pacing the scene, will take the lead if you dawdle. This is, in its investigatory elements at least, a failure-free game. Even if you bodge your way through, the story branches to find other ways of delivering the required evidence to you (although each case ends with a ranking of your sleuthing skills).

There's no doubting *LA Noire*'s considerable potential – its aesthetic sensibilities are dead on, and the stew of criminals and crooked cops is a potent concoction. The proof will be in the pacing – in how the game negotiates its transition between the interactions of play and the architecture of its plot. It's not an open-and-shut case, but *LA Noire* certainly has the most promising of leads.



LA consequential

This is not a sandbox game; the open city here is an elaborate prop to support the central drama. Though there are diversionary events as Cole drives through the world – everything from purse snatches to armed heists – the sprawling recreation of LA is not a hotbed of frivolous interactivity. There are collectibles, too – a sop to the achievement-hunting obsessives – but you won't stumble across stunt jumps or playable fruit machines. Bondi draws such a vast urban network simply to root its aesthetic, a decision that gives some sense of the level of dedication to the noir genre that exists in all aspects of the game – and, no doubt, to the depth of Rockstar's pockets.



Though the facial capture technology continues to amaze, *LA Noire* has moments of uncanniness: with body motion captured separately, there can be a disconnect with the head



Everybody's lying about something – but it doesn't mean they're the one you're after. You can believe them, doubt them and turn up the heat, or use evidence from your notebook



It is possible to plough through red lights, mount kerbs and smash through other vehicles – such is the unrestricted nature of *LA Noire*'s open world. But you will be rated on the amount of money you cost the LAPD in repairs

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **RELIC ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **Q3 2011**

Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine

Relic shifts its view even closer to the grim darkness of the tabletop wargame



Chaos cultists bring daemons that flit over the battlefield, dipping in and out of reality. They're best tackled from a distance: get surrounded and their claws will tear Titus apart







A heavy attack sends 'Ard Boys (above) reeling, forcing them to lower their shields. Engage in crowd control before trying to take one down, or you'll get swamped

Games Workshop's vision of the 41st millennium is admittedly short on holiday destinations, but even the most dedicated fan of industrial architecture would be unlikely to pick the Forge World of Graia for a stop-off. Forge Worlds are Warhammer 40,000's factories, dedicated planets blanketed by the cogs and gears of production and staffed by billions of future-peasants. They're also – as *Space Marine*'s Captain Titus finds out fairly soon into the game – ripe for invasion by 40K's aliens.

Graia itself is dedicated to the production of Titans: some of 40K's largest machines. Except production's ground to a halt, because the planet's been invaded by two insidious forces: Orks, from the outside, and Chaos, potentially from within. Captain Titus must scrub them all from the production line.





Titus can carry only one melee weapon at a time, plus three guns. The chainsword can quickly put holes in crowds, but lacks the thump of the thunder-hammer

Space Marine is ostensibly similar to thirdperson cover shooters – the *Gears* comparison hangs heavy – but does away with a key word in that genre description. In that armour, a Space Marine taking cover behind a rock would be incongruous, so the mechanic has been jettisoned. Instead of running and hiding, damaged marines must thrust themselves into battle to regain their strength. Execution attacks – grabbing a foe and pulling him apart, or crushing his skull with a boot – restore health. It also bolsters a 'fury' meter. Should players choose to unleash it while wielding a gun, the game enters a bullet-time mode, making headshots and target selection a doddle. Let rip with a fury attack in the midst of melee combat, and you'll cut a swathe through anything in your path.

Developer Relic expects players to flip back and forth between these two styles – ranged as you close the distance, melee to deliver the real damage. Transitioning between the two is a matter of holding or releasing the left trigger, but it's not always as fluid as it could be. The lack of a true combo system means attacks are simple chains of light or heavy moves, never the two combined, and in its current pre-alpha form the game sorely needs a hit indicator. All too often, hammering the X button sends Titus off on poorly aimed sweeps, the superhuman veteran of a thousand battles waving his chainsword menacingly through thin air.

In the depths of combat, the simple interactions have a consistent grisly heft. Even weak melee attacks hit with force, splitting Orks and reducing Gretchen (space-goblins) to a fine crimson mist. The introduction of dedicated ranged foes reduces the game somewhat, turning engagements into samey potshot duels. They're especially frustrating during mixed battles as they stand behind cover, way out of chainsword reach, while the player is trapped in a killing field below.

Space Marine's pre-alpha code still has an array of balancing issues: at the moment, death comes too easily. So early is the build we played that a kick move that would help string together combo attacks has been dropped thanks to a lack of room on the pad. With the developer's release history, and its near-total understanding of the 40K universe, *Space Marine* isn't lacking in atmosphere. If the two combat strands intertwine to form a seamless whole, Relic will have bottled the violence imagined by thousands of tabletop players during two decades of battles, finally allowing it to be studied at close range.



Weaponised

After 25 years, Games Workshop has quite an armoury for Relic to dig through. Primary among Space Marine sidearms is the bolter. It operates much like a typical assault rifle, but – in keeping with 40K's hyper-violence – sustained fire tears limbs and bursts skulls. More exotic weapons include the plasma gun, which fires bursts of superheated ionised gas, and the thunder-hammer. Many weapons haven't been adequately described by 40K lore, leaving Relic to brainstorm a solution. The main example is the melta gun: an anti-armour weapon in the tabletop rulebook, *Space Marine*'s incarnation handles like a fire-spitting shotgun.



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FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **HANDCIRCUS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

Okabu

Handcircus whips up a little cloud strife on a pastoral Pacific island





As well as being able to suck up liquids, Kumulo and Nimbe can carry smaller objects such as acorns and fire nuts in order to plant seeds, smash pots or take out Dozabots



While indie developers and heavyweight publishers alike continue to join in the mobile phone gaming gold rush, HandCircus is bucking the trend. The London-based developer struck success with its *Rolando* games, a pair of cutesy 2D platformers that were among the first titles to push and then define the boundaries of iOS gaming early in the iPhone's life. But for the past year the studio has turned its back on the platform with which it made its name to focus on home console development, a move that's in direct contrast to prevailing fashions.

Nevertheless, *Okabu*, a downloadable title scheduled for release on PSN this summer, still shares its aesthetic with the *Rolando* games, including its cheery disposition. Idiosyncratic Finnish illustrator Mikko Walamies has once again provided the art direction although, with the move to 3D, HandCircus has employed an in-house artist to turn Walamies' designs into 3D objects.

The result is just as visually arresting and recognisable as the studio's previous titles, its cartoonish characterisation reminiscent of *The Wind Waker* and even *Okami*. Most importantly, in casting the player as one of two anthropomorphic clouds, Kumulo or Nimbe, *Okabu* settles upon a pair of lead characters who are just as likeable as the rotund Rolandos.



The soundtrack has been provided by a host of African musicians and vocalists to give the audio a unique quality, a world away from Mr Scruff's work on *Rolando*

The studio returns to themes of nature, setting the game on a Pacific island. This time the threat is one of industry, the lives of the tribal Yorubo endangered by the polluting creep of the Doza. In conjunction with a friend or an AI, you take control of the twin clouds as they work together with a clutch of ability-enhancing riders to stem the industrial invasion. The environmentalist message is handled with a light touch, and while there's a lot of raining on oily crops to clean them and see them restored to blossom, the preaching is gentle and implicit.

Explicit, however, are the smart, engaging puzzles that must be cleared to progress. The clouds themselves are only able to absorb liquids and redistribute them, a tool that allows you to quench fires with water, or direct them with oil. The four NPC riders that you scoop up and on to your wispy back provide additional abilities. Captain Monkfish, for example, will lend you his harpoon plunger with which to pull down drawbridges, open treasure chests, lug bombs towards enemies, and guide misplaced fish to their school.

Piccolo, meanwhile, is able to charm animals, leading bulls to heavy doors in order to charge them down or guiding chickens to shrubbery that they will then chomp down to clear a pathway. Challenge is provided by juggling the riders on each cloud in order to clear sequential puzzles, the player flitting between roles at the touch of a button.

Okabu's greatest challenge is that the game has been produced as a local co-operative experience. The lack of online co-op play seems like an oversight, especially as the AI control in singleplayer remains sketchy with just a few months of development time left. Nevertheless, there is more than merely a charming world to water here. The puzzles themselves enjoy as much character and humour as Walamies' artwork – and with time left to polish, *Okabu* will likely be in full bloom by summer.



Heads in the clouds

Each of the four Yorubo NPC partners has their own associated minigame outside of the main story, in arcade-style scored challenges with associated leaderboards. In Captain Monkfish's game you must drag bait through a maze in order to lure 'Bushybeasts' into a pen. As with the main campaign, these minigames are played co-operatively, allowing well-organised pairs of players to show off their teamwork via the irrefutable metric of scores.





As well as pulling over statues, explosive fruit can be harpooned by Captain Monkfish and hurled at the Doza or parts of the environment



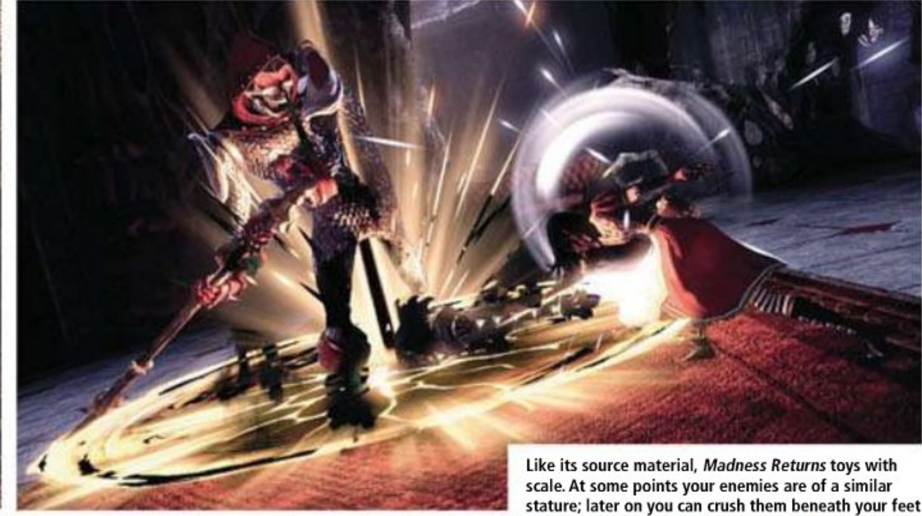
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FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **SPICY HORSE**
ORIGIN: **CHINA**
RELEASE: **JUNE**

Alice: Madness Returns

Galumphing through Alice's tulgy mind reveals abundant snicker-snackery





Like its source material, *Madness Returns* toys with scale. At some points your enemies are of a similar stature; later on you can crush them beneath your feet

Quite whether Alice's visual appeal can stretch over a whole game is still unknown. It's seems sure, however, that fans of the original *American McGee's Alice* will be partial to its looks

In 2001 *American McGee's Alice* proved that knife crime was endemic throughout Wonderland. Eleven years on, and literature's most psychedelic, and most frequently reimagined, heroine is back – this time with a teapot cannon.

Developed by McGee's Shanghai studio Spicy Horse, *Madness Returns* sees Alice released from the original game's Rutledge Asylum thanks to something of a care in the community programme. She's now wandering the streets of Victorian London under the tutelage of a local psychiatrist. Still scarred by the fiery death of her parents, Alice's mental wanderings are far from cured, and when she turns to Wonderland for comfort she again finds it changed and warped by her own insanity. But might murderous slashes of her Vorpal Blade within Wonderland eventually provide clues to the identity of her family's murderer in the real world? The nature of psychological drama would certainly suggest so.

One location on Alice's travels is Queen's Land – an ancient, broken castle full of red carpets, overgrown ivy and forlorn stone hearts. Here, having admired the simple beauty of Alice's hair animation, we find ourselves dashing around collecting teeth, foraging for plot-embellishing memory fragments and guzzling shrink potion – with your diminished form letting you read invisible messages on walls and spot formerly hidden platforms moving around the level.

Later, in the castle's courtyard, we give the guards a taste of hobby-horse mallet – pulling off combos and dodges against bulging sackcloth playing cards perforated with bloody markings and adorned with skulls for faces. The enemy design is haunting and menacing, aided no end by the soft tinkle of a xylophone on their approach, while the frenetic combat is undeniably engaging. Also in the fray are the Ruined, vast, lumbering black blobs with three tarnished doll faces on their front and various steam pipes and chimneys protruding from their rear. They spew burning rocks in Alice's direction – which she in turn must repel with a block from her twirling parasol or bewitch with her toy clockwork rabbit. The bunny can then be detonated at the feet of Ruined and Playing Card alike, ensuring a few safe bloodied slashes at their hearts with the Vorpal Blade.

The past 11 years might have warped Wonderland into something even more deranged and horrifying, but it has also locked Alice's gameplay into a far more recognisable model of thirdperson action and gunplay. Beneath the parasol blocks, the rotating handle of the pepper-grinder machine-gun, the teapot-based explosives and the showers of butterflies as Alice teleport-dodges her way out of trouble lie familiar thirdperson action tropes. Absolutely everything, however, is coated with a sweet/sour Wonderland sheen that is at once enthralling, beautiful and deeply disturbed.

The original *American McGee's Alice* sold over a million copies on PC, and within *Madness Returns* its remarkable and original vision seems untainted. It must be said, however, that a decade on and within a gaming cycle obsessed with machismo-led sequels it is now harder to imagine a mainstream audience happily taking tea with such a willfully obtuse world and concept. The fear that *Madness Returns* could prove to be this year's *Enslaved*, and indeed that the game will be met at retail by a monocled hare pointing out the tardiness of such a belated sequel, must surely be lurking within its publisher's mind.

Beyond Burton

Despite being somewhat sidelined by the success of Tim Burton's Alice In Wonderland movie, we hope that the return of *American McGee's Alice* might rekindle prospects of a cinematic treatment. McGee's vision of Wonderland was originally marked as film to be helmed by Wes Craven, but for the past decade the project has seen a troubled development – passed between Dimension Films, 20th Century Fox and Universal. Most recently, the project was attached to Buffy star Sarah Michelle Gellar, a self-proclaimed fan of the game, but for the past three years the big guns of Hollywood have gone silent. If *Madness Returns* were to re-establish this vision of Alice in both hearts and minds, then perhaps hope remains.

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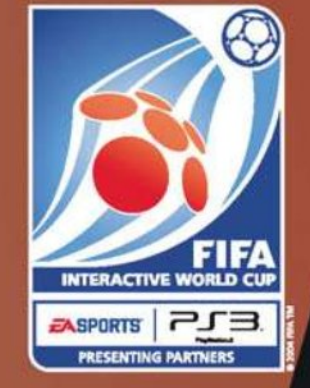
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FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **VANGUARD ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **THE NETHERLANDS**
RELEASE: **Q2 2011**

Gatling Gears

An explosive return to the steampunk fantasy universe



It's unlikely you'd ever guess it, but this pyrotechnically inclined twin-stick shooter is the second game in the Mistbound series that turn-based strategy *Greed Corp* kicked off on PSN and XBLA in 2010. It doesn't help that its Netherlands-based developer, W!Games, has since merged with another local game production studio to form Vanguard Entertainment, led by Guerrilla Games co-founder Martin de Ronde. Nor does the fact that *Gatling Gears* has been renamed from its original *Gunstorm* moniker. But since when has consistent branding meant anything?

Though *Gatling Gears* is rather less novel than its smartly designed and complex predecessor, it does at least share its colourfully chunky cartoon steampunk art style. At the controls of a Gatling Gear mech, you (and a co-op partner if you wish) must rain fire down on mechanical foes in verdant environments, blowing them asunder in generous eruptions of fire, smoke and gears. The latter are collected for points, subject, of course, to a multiplier system. Gold bar pickups, meanwhile, act as currency for a simple weapons and armour upgrade system.

The right stick directs regular Gatling gun fire, while holding the right trigger sends rounds of rockets flying and the left trigger activates a crosshair to select where your mech will throw grenades. You'll have a stock of three grenades and six rockets, each of which slowly recharges after you use them. Our short time with the game doesn't prove whether the weapons have relative strengths – we just tend to spam them when we have them available – while a generous health bar and health pickups prevents the action from straying into the spartan realms of *Geometry Wars* and *DonPachi*.

Yes, *DonPachi*: the end-of-level boss of the sequence we play streams clouds of slow-moving bullets and revolving energy rays that evoke bullet hell lite. But the lushness of the visuals makes the experience a lot less exacting than its inspiration. Instead, *Gatling Gears* currently comes across as rather light entertainment. As its regular, friendly take on co-op suggests, it's all about drop-in, drop-out fun. It's a departure from *Greed Corp*, then, but also a much more congenial introduction to the world of Mistbound.





Environments feature plenty of detail and various destructible elements, but your mech moves so slowly that it's little use to attempt tactical use of space



The end-of-demo boss is a three-stage affair, your bullets doing tiny damage to its health bar. What it lacks in mechanical invention it makes up for with visual charm

MotoHeroz

RedLynx faces its trials and comes out smiling with a new game

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **REDLYNX**
ORIGIN: **FINLAND**
RELEASE: **TBA**

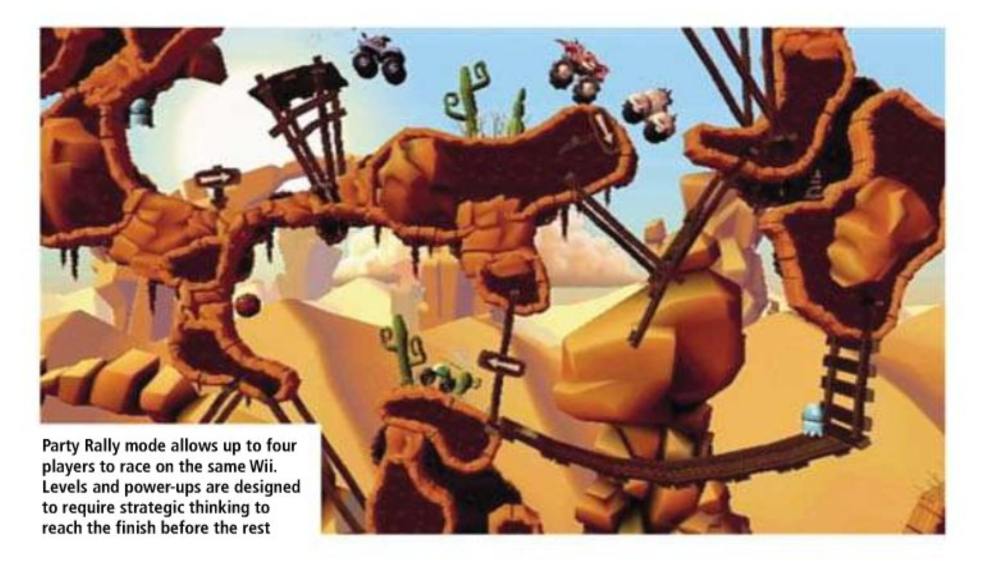
Even when you were sliding backwards down a devilishly steep incline on your face after your 132nd botched ascent, clinging doggedly to your motocross bike, it was impossible to resist the one-more-go charms of *Trials*. RedLynx's punishingly difficult PC and XBLA hits proved that deftly tuned vehicle physics, slick 2.5D graphics and cunning side-scrolling platforming challenges proved just as combustible as the stockpiles of dynamite and missile warheads sprinkled liberally across the game's more difficult tracks.

The Finnish developer's newest project *MotoHeroz* boasts the same genome that made *Trials HD* such a joy, but changes gears by applying a thick lacquer of kid-friendly Nintendo polish, optimising the experience for its WiiWare target demographic. Instead of a helmeted motorcycle rider getting mangled with each and every crash, the racing in *MotoHeroz* invites you to choose from 14 different colourful vehicles that bounce and tumble and zoom cheerily along through side-scrolling, cartoony environments – Forest, Desert, Arctic and Moon. Each environment would feel right at home in a *Mario Galaxy* or *Sonic* game.

While the singleplayer Story Adventure mode featuring plucky hero Gene McQuick offers a fine variety of challenges, it's clear that local Party Rally, which lets up to four players tussle their way to the finish, will easily be the stickiest game type. Unlike the mostly linear progression of a *Mario Kart*, the 100+ levels in *MotoHeroz* offer a tantalising range of paths, each one offering its own strategic risk-reward wrinkles. Leaderboard addicts, you have been warned.

The pace of *MotoHeroz*'s gameplay stays snappy, thanks in part to the *Smash Bros*-style 'everybody on screen at once' presentation. Instead of splitscreen, the camera simply follows the lead vehicle, and anybody lagging behind who gets squeezed offscreen automatically respawns, incurring a time penalty. Daily-refreshing online challenges and a synthy, retro-inspired soundtrack by BAFTA-nominated composer Petri Alanko (*Alan Wake*) merely rev up our anticipation that much more.





Party Rally mode allows up to four players to race on the same Wii. Levels and power-ups are designed to require strategic thinking to reach the finish before the rest





RedLynx wants to marry the physics-based fun of *Trials HD* with old-school side-scroller elements. Hence these stylised snow and forest environments



A MAN CALLED PAYNE

HOW ROCKSTAR IS REBUILDING THE LIFE OF A MAN ON FIRE – AND SENDING HIM BACK INTO BATTLE

Though it's easy to forget, considering all the pretenders and wannabes that leapt into its slow-mo wake, ten years ago *Max Payne* was something entirely new. Combining elements of film noir, Hong Kong action cinema and Scandinavian mythology, Remedy's downbeat thirdperson shooter presented a character at the end of his tether, lost within a quest for revenge, but not yet given over to the nihilistic excesses of a true anti-hero. Here was a comparatively rounded individual with an emotional core, manifested as the game's constant internal monologue. Payne was the anti-Duke Nukem.

For the sequel, writer Sam Lake expanded the narrative scope of the series. The protagonist was given a love interest in the shape of ambiguous assassin Mona Sax, and a clearer mission to take on the shady Inner Circle organisation. But *Max Payne 2* stuck with the basic appeal – an essentially likeable fall guy with nothing to lose, raging against the machine.

And then it seemed that the machine had won. In 2004, Take Two's then CEO Jeffrey Lapin insisted that a third title would materialise at some point, having bought the rights to the franchise two years previously, but a long silence followed. Remedy started on *Alan Wake*; Rockstar had *GTAIV* and *Red Dead Redemption* to think about. Rumours surfaced and dropped. Things moved on.

In 2009, however, Payne was back, courtesy of Rockstar Vancouver, the studio behind *Bully*. Rockstar president **Sam Houser** commented: "This is Max as we've never seen him before, a few years older, more world-weary and cynical than ever. We experience the downward spiral of his life." He wasn't kidding. The new Payne was revealed to be bald, bearded and bulky.

For Rockstar Vancouver, the pressure was on, not only to capture the feel of Remedy's titles, but also to evolve the series. Art director **Rob Nelson**, however, is keen to play down the notion that this is about taking on a new franchise from nothing. "Rockstar has been involved with Max since the beginning," he notes. "We worked on the original games, so it's not that much of a stretch for us to take on these characters; it's not like we're picking up this franchise fresh. But it's still the continuation of a series, so you have to stay true to the feel of the writing. We love Max and we want to do right by him. That's the biggest challenge for us: the decisions we come to have to make sense for him."

Nelson also asserts that this is, in fact,

TITLE: **MAX PAYNE 3**
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **CANADA, US, UK**
RELEASE: **TBC**

Payne's look hovers somewhere between Last Boy Scout-era Bruce Willis and *Kane & Lynch*. His expulsion from New York and stressful new career may have something to do with it

a Rockstar Studios rather than Rockstar Vancouver production. As with *GTAIV* and *Red Dead Redemption*, there has been a huge amount of co-operation between different teams, this time involving Vancouver, Toronto, London and New England. As he explains, "We have a lot of talented people across all our studios, and this just means we can bring the right people in for a specific task when needed – and it gives the games a consistent level of quality and an approach that's recognisably Rockstar."

So now here we are – eight years after the events of the second game. Payne is out of the NYPD. Far out. Somehow, he's drifted south, working as a private security contractor in São Paulo, Brazil's mega-city of 41 million residents, where boundless wealth and extreme poverty exist on each other's doorsteps. Payne's main clients are the super-rich property mogul Rodrigo Branco



The *Max Payne* universe hasn't lost its love of guns. This one (modelled on a Beretta) features moving slide and hammer components – a level of detail that extends to every weapon

"WE'RE ALWAYS PLAYING WITH TIME IN THE STORY. WE MOVE BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS. IT'S UNLIKE ANYTHING WE'VE DONE IN OUR GAMES BEFORE"

and his two brothers, a politician and a party-loving dropout – a juicy setup for the series' hallmark labyrinthine plotting.

And in Rockstar's demo room we get the first indication that, actually, *Max Payne 3* isn't just going to kick off eight years down the line. We're here to see one of the earliest missions in the game: Rodrigo Branco's trophy wife has been kidnapped by the Commando Sombre street gang, and there's a huge ransom on her head. The Branco brothers merely want Payne to make the money drop and get her back safely. But the Payne we see onscreen has a full head of hair, and isn't the booze-soaked hulk we'd been led to expect. Apparently, we're going to get a glimpse of the intervening years between New York Max and the dishevelled alcoholic he has become – although Nelson teasingly suggests it might not necessarily be in sequence. "We're always playing with time in the story," he explains. "We move backwards and forwards; we use really aggressive editing. It's unlike anything we've done in any of our games before."

The kidnap exchange takes place on the pitch of an enormous football stadium. In the opening sequence, Payne and his partner Passos are waiting in front of their helicopter, which has touched down in the centre circle. It's a brooding, ostentatious setup, clearly inspired more by tech-savvy stylist Michael Mann than John Woo – an interesting indication that the series' cultural reference points have moved on with the times. As the kidnap gang approaches, shots ring out – there's another group on the scene, heavily armed and looking to get in on the action. Payne is hit in the arm and Passos drags him into the stadium, scoping out ahead as the player stumbles through the complex, looking for the medical room. There's a health icon



in the bottom right of the screen which is critically low and, as in the previous games, needs to be topped up by popping pills.

Throughout all of this, the action segments are intercut with an evolution of the old *Max Payne* story sequences. Now, instead of comic book frames, these dramatic plot pointers use the in-game engine and show an animated collage of action footage. It brings to mind TV series 24, and it's just one of the ways Rockstar is seeking to both maintain and update key *Payne* elements.

"We've put a lot of work into evolving the graphic-novel aesthetic that was used in *Max Payne* and *Max Payne 2*," Nelson explains. "We're still working on it, but we're honing in on a motion comic book approach, because it retains part of the style and the drama of the original scenes, yet fits with the pace of *Max Payne 3*. In addition to that, we're integrating storytelling into the gameplay itself through the use of hundreds of customised animations for multiple characters and situations – like the way Passos moves through the level with Max, scouting ahead, taking out enemies and interacting naturally with the environment. The third way is that we're bringing back Max's classic narration, which not only helps move the story forward, but adds to the atmosphere of the game. We want people to move seamlessly from cutscene to gameplay without pauses in the flow or big breaks in the overall look and feel, and this seems to be the right way to go."

From this point in our demo, there are multiple set-piece encounters as Payne and Passos move through the stadium, tracking a single kidnapper who has run off with the loot. We fight small skirmishes in various



Rob Nelson, art director, Rockstar Studios

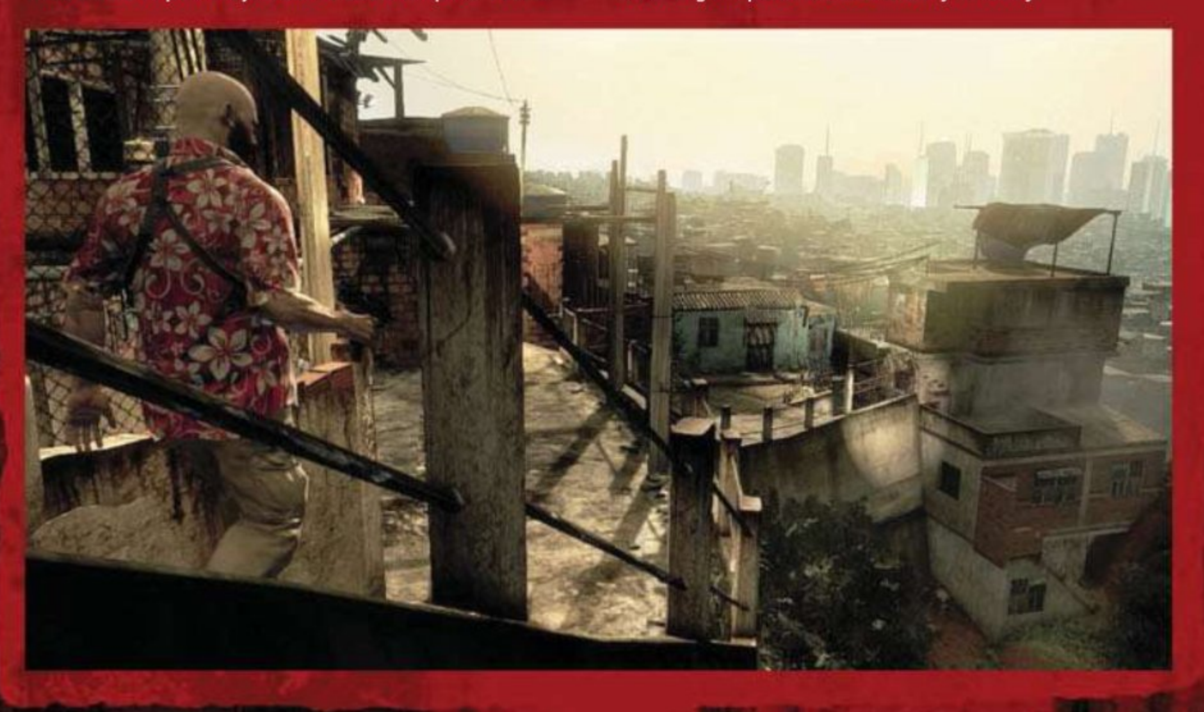
WELCOME TO SÃO PAULO

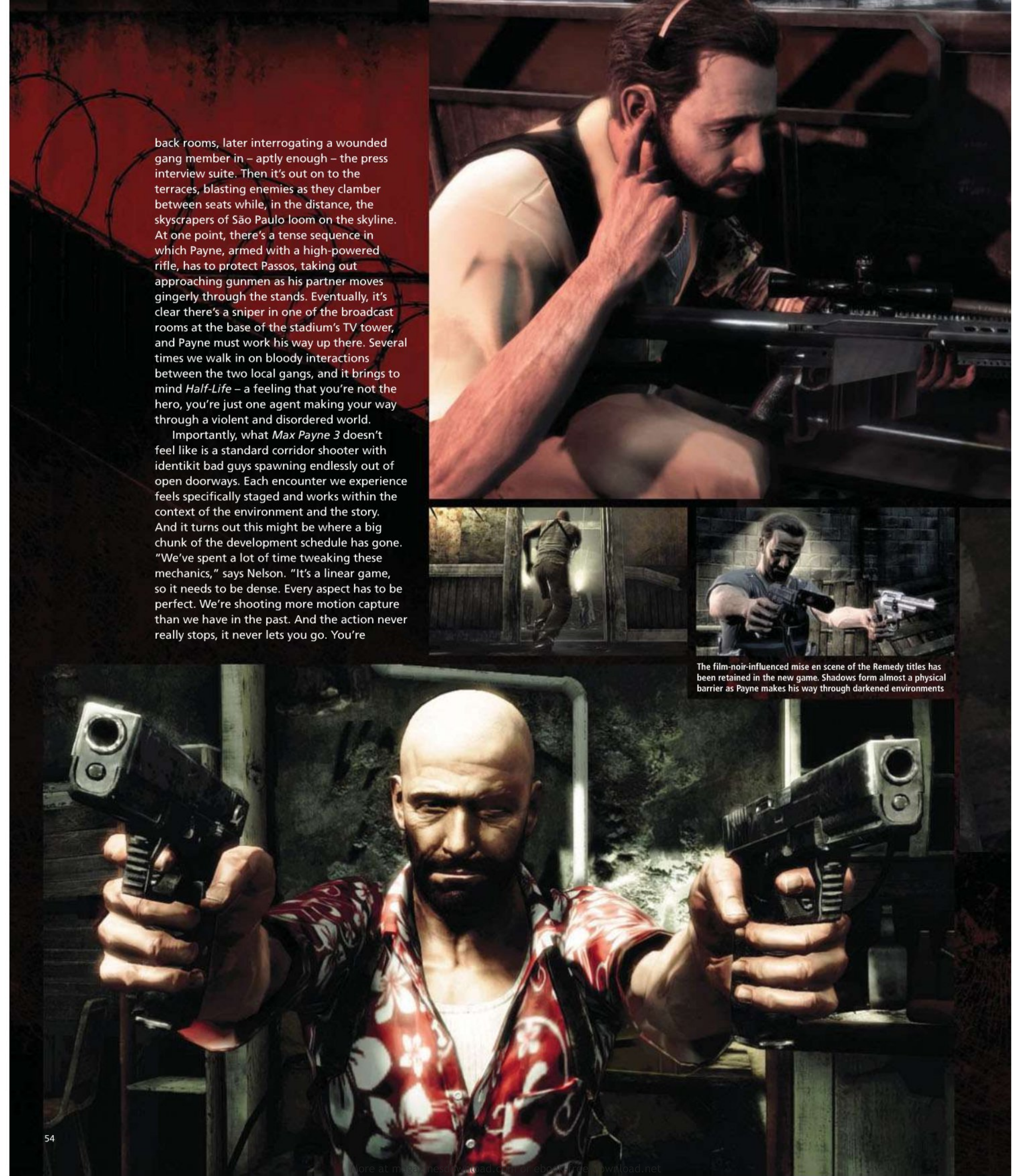
One of the first questions that emerged after the game's announcement was: why São Paulo? Why take Payne out of his New York home and into Brazil's vast metropolis? "We saw a lot of diverse environments that we could stick him in," answers Nelson. "It's a huge city and there's a major disparity between rich and poor. Learning about that, finding out how massive the place is, has been fascinating."

Importantly, Rockstar claims to have put the same amount of research into the city as Remedy did with New York, drawing out a similar number of first-hand materials (the original *Max Payne* was one of the first PC titles to use digitised photos as texture maps). Several members of the development team travelled to Brazil for weeks of photography and filming, immersing themselves in local society. When asked about the surprising elements, Nelson finds it hard to pick out just one or two examples. "I think the elite police forces that they have there – the BOPE – were quite interesting; they're pretty serious dudes. And the music they're into there, the clubs they have… every corner you turn round there's cool stuff to discover."

A key aim, then, has been to capture the variety of the architecture and the culture. "We can't really re-use a lot of assets," says Nelson. "Every stage is going to be different from the last one. Brazil is a fascinating place to set a game – there are plenty of unique aspects to the setting that we'll reveal over time. We've got a lot to work with."

And, according to Nelson, the process is continuing. "The research is constant, it's anything that we can get our hands on, pretty much all the way through development. Everyone gets really interested – we're always swapping things we've learned, trying to make sure we're accurately recreating the place. We take it really seriously."



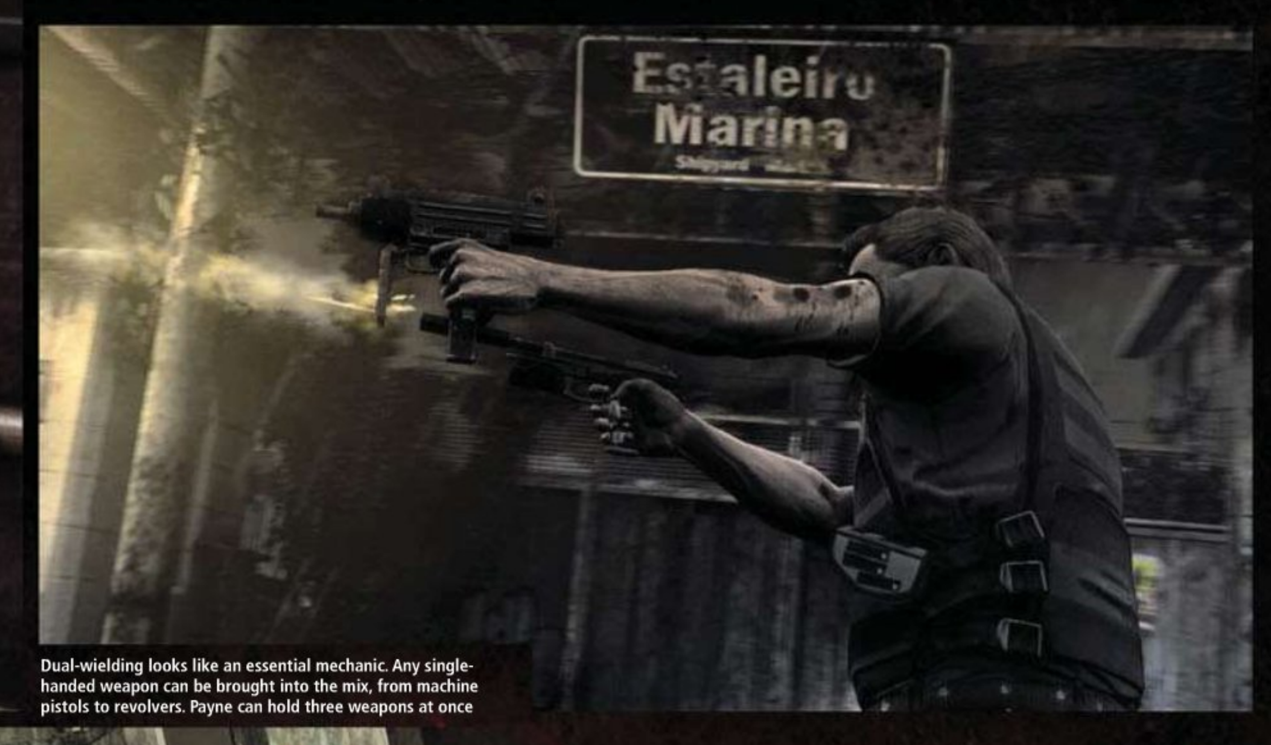


back rooms, later interrogating a wounded gang member in – aptly enough – the press interview suite. Then it's out on to the terraces, blasting enemies as they clamber between seats while, in the distance, the skyscrapers of São Paulo loom on the skyline. At one point, there's a tense sequence in which Payne, armed with a high-powered rifle, has to protect Passos, taking out approaching gunmen as his partner moves gingerly through the stands. Eventually, it's clear there's a sniper in one of the broadcast rooms at the base of the stadium's TV tower, and Payne must work his way up there. Several times we walk in on bloody interactions between the two local gangs, and it brings to mind *Half-Life* – a feeling that you're not the hero, you're just one agent making your way through a violent and disordered world.

Importantly, what *Max Payne 3* doesn't feel like is a standard corridor shooter with identikit bad guys spawning endlessly out of open doorways. Each encounter we experience feels specifically staged and works within the context of the environment and the story. And it turns out this might be where a big chunk of the development schedule has gone. "We've spent a lot of time tweaking these mechanics," says Nelson. "It's a linear game, so it needs to be dense. Every aspect has to be perfect. We're shooting more motion capture than we have in the past. And the action never really stops, it never lets you go. You're

The film-noir-influenced mise en scene of the Remedy titles has been retained in the new game. Shadows form almost a physical barrier as Payne makes his way through darkened environments





Dual-wielding looks like an essential mechanic. Any single-handed weapon can be brought into the mix, from machine pistols to revolvers. Payne can hold three weapons at once



Environments are fully destructible – although in the favelas, many locations are rundown to begin with. Reference photos were taken throughout the city to ensure an authentic look

This more seamless interplay of cinematic and interactive elements is Rockstar's concession to modern mores – it's about understanding that the shooter genre has gone through many changes since *Max Payne 2*. "Both the games and the audiences have become more sophisticated," says Nelson. "Gamers expect a more fully realised cinematic experience, even if the main mechanic is still shooting. And though this is a more linear game for us, people want to be constantly surprised and entertained in new ways. So you need a lot of custom setups, the environments need to be varied, and all of that while keeping the gameplay fun and responsive – people have become really specific about how they want things to be controlled. It's a lot more work!"

Meanwhile, shoot-dodge is accessible once again, allowing Payne to launch himself across the floor, over objects or down staircases to avoid incoming fire

"BOTH THE GAMES AND THE AUDIENCES HAVE BECOME MORE SOPHISTICATED. GAMERS EXPECT A MORE FULLY REALISED CINEMATIC EXPERIENCE"

walking in and out of these cutscenes, these panel sequences; the section with the sniper rifle – we had to mo-cap all of those sequences. It's all performance-led, so it looks believable. And it really comes alive. When you're looking through that scope, you're really watching your buddy – you want to take care of him. It took a lot of time to co-ordinate and get that stuff shot."

Contrasting with all of this carefully choreographed scene creation is the fluidity and realism of the physical interactions. Fights are fraught, fast and brutal, as you'd expect. But now bullet-time – charged by killing enemies, as ever – has a layer of beauty to match its gameplay impact. As with *RDR*, the level of graphical detail on offer delivers astonishing action moments – glass smashes, blood spurts, furniture collapses – but here it's fragmented and slowed to show off the fine physical elements. Bullet-cam is also back with an increased role, this time providing a bloody full-stop to every encounter, so players know they can progress. In between, it's all rapid gunfire, some seemingly intelligent group movement from the enemies, and plenty of context-sensitive animations.

(beautifully shown as bullet trails burning through the air toward you). There are no canned animations – Payne can dive in any direction and when he lands, he reacts to the environment, thrusting out a hand or shoulder to absorb the impact, or thudding down stairs, legs flailing. "It really places him inside the environment in a way that makes the whole game feel more stylish and immersive," says Nelson. "He feels like a character naturally responding to the world around him."

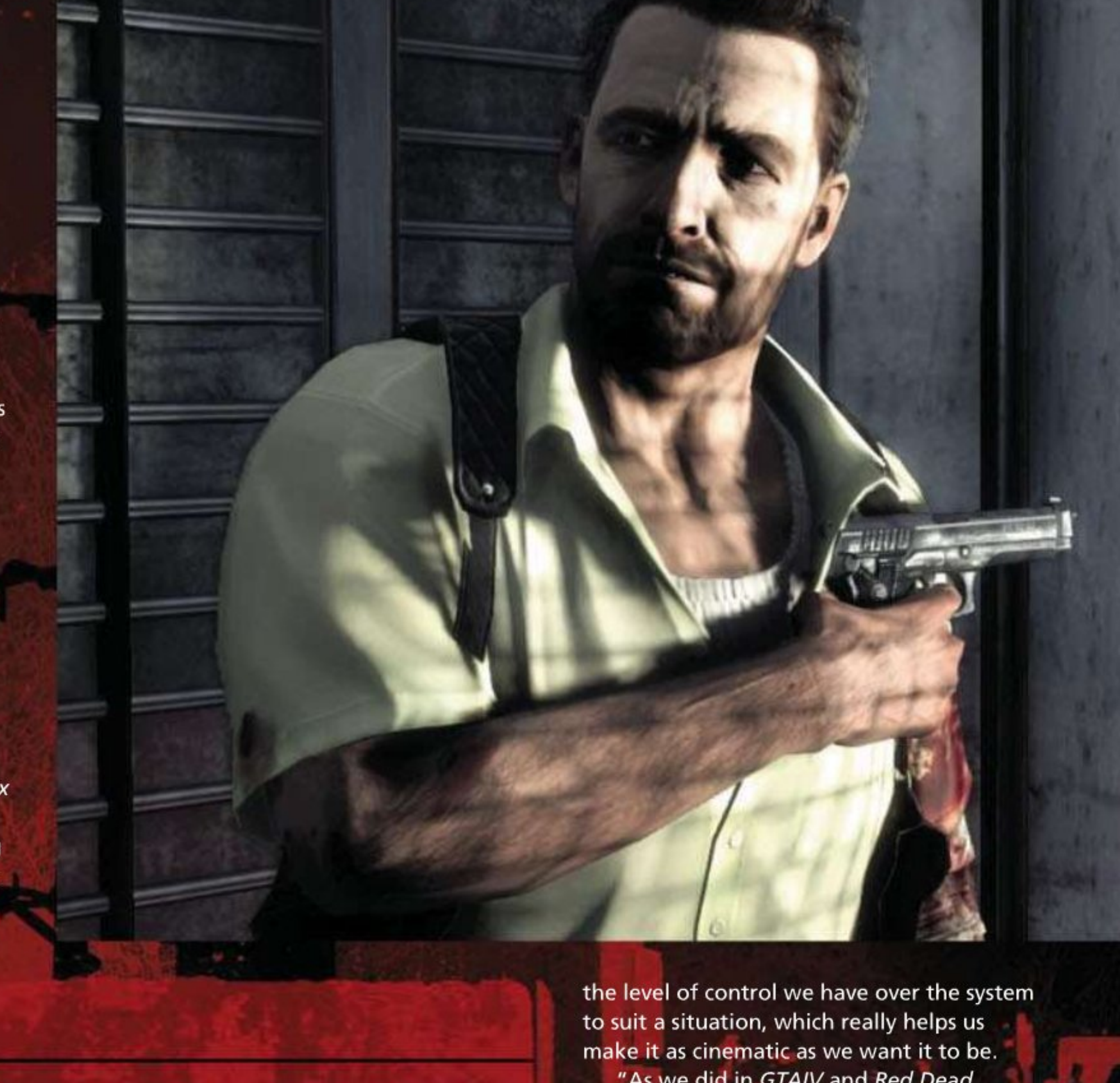
There's a new cover system, too, allowing players to duck behind scenic objects. The mechanic is still being worked on, but right now, the left trigger locks you to the surface, while the right trigger lets you pop out and shoot. If you release the left trigger, you can blind fire, aiming with the right stick. It seems manageable enough, and combined with the directional shoot-dodge provides a more strategic approach to combat – another hint that the *Payne* franchise is on top of developments in the shooter genre.

Much of the game's physicality is, of course, down to its NaturalMotion Euphoria component, which brings procedural animation and a full motion system to the character models. "Every game we do, we're thinking about how to push NaturalMotion in new directions," says Nelson. "I think *Red Dead* was a nice evolution from *GTA*, and *Max* is going to be the same thing again. We've put a lot of attention on AI reactions, making sure that the force of the bullet feels right. It adds a level of weight and realism to every character, and the beauty of it is we can vary the level of control we have over the system to suit a situation, which really helps us make it as cinematic as we want it to be.

"As we did in *GTAIV* and *Red Dead Redemption*, we've been working to improve the way enemies respond uniquely to each gunshot – they'll even duck for near-misses. We also put a lot of work in to the bullet-cams: we're cutting to these a lot so we're putting a focus on the forces to feel right when these things are hitting guys."

Nelson also believes that adding Euphoria data to Payne's own animations is the key element in the game's crunching feel – and it's still in development. "Depending on if you're crouching into a wall when you're shoot-dodging or flying down a set of stairs or landing on something, Euphoria is really helpful in making those situations feel natural, rather than having Max crash into things and ragdoll. We can make it feel like he's anticipating an impact before it happens – that's an exciting thing we're working on."

As for the game's armoury, we see Payne wielding pistols, rifles and sub-machine guns, as well as that useful sniper rifle. There's a wheel-based selection system, like *RDR*'s, allowing him to carry three weapons at once. He can also select two single-handed items to dual-wield, allowing him to charge into fights with, say, a 9mm handgun and an uzi. There's an almost sensual attention to detail here – when Payne fires, we see the hammer pop back, the slide move and the bullet casing eject. Meanwhile, amid skirmishes, the animation celebrates unusual firing techniques, with enemies ducking behind



ACTORS IN PAYNE

Rockstar has confirmed that James McCaffrey, the voice of Payne in the first two games, is returning to the character – this time in a full acting role. Similarly to the likes of *Red Dead*, *Call of Duty: Black Ops* and *Heavy Rain*, the development team has gone for full performance capture, with actors performing in group mo-cap sessions. "The way we did it before, the actors were separated into recording booths, but now the performance that we capture is the performance that you see," says Nelson. "It's definitely better for actors and for directors to work in that way. It's been amazing to watch it come alive – because we're doing a lot more live-action cutscenes and performances and we do it on the floor with the actors, we're seeing more of the character of Max coming through. He's coming alive through these relationships – it's been fun to watch."

The script feels good, too. The stadium mission is full of Payne's usual witticisms, delivered in a sly, throwaway style that conjures the crime flicks of Steven Soderbergh. After his partner explains a particularly dangerous plan of action, Payne responds: "I may have written the book on dumb ideas, but Passos sure wasn't afraid to quote from it." It's understated, but many times more appealing than the shrieking wisecracks that have littered dozens of shooters since Payne first opened his mouth in 2001.

Enemies don't always engage using predictable, straightforward aiming, and neither does Payne. Character animations – yours and your foes' – give the game a vivid sense of momentum

Hundreds of hours of motion-capture footage has been captured, which is blended with the Euphoria engine to create characters that interact accurately and realistically with tricky environments



cover and spraying out gunfire in all directions, or firing behind them as they run.

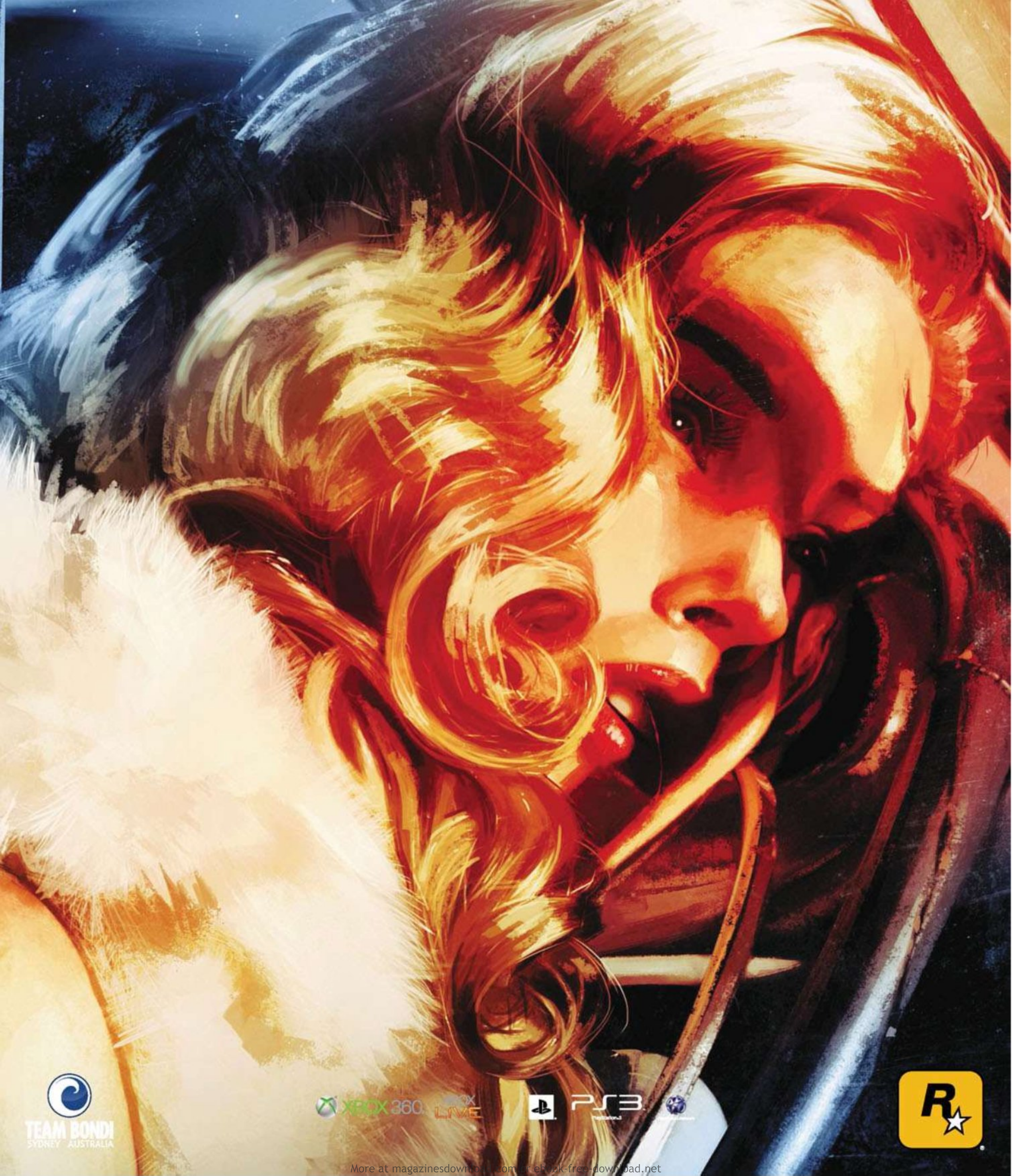
There's also a new extension to the whole slow-mo mechanic. At climactic points in each mission, there will be a bullet-time sequence triggered, not by the player, but by a key situation. At the close of the stadium scene, for example, when Payne discovers the sniper locked away in a commentator's booth, he climbs on to a lighting rig and swings down, crashing in through the window. "It all comes back to the idea of making the gameplay as cinematic as a cutscene," Nelson explains. "Creating interactive set-pieces around bullet-time seemed like a great natural extension of the approach used in earlier games. It changes up the player's expectations of any given situation, and it looks incredible."

"EUPHORIA REALLY HELPS IN MAKING SITUATIONS FEEL NATURAL. WE CAN MAKE IT FEEL LIKE MAX IS ANTICIPATING AN IMPACT BEFORE IT HAPPENS"

At the close of the stadium mission, it seems the group that gatecrashed the hostage handover are in hi-tech flak jackets, and their weaponry is cutting-edge. There's a suggestion that they're members of a paramilitary organisation or the BOPE, Brazil's elite police squad specialising in urban warfare. Whatever the case, Passos sees them capture and interrogate a Commando Sombre member; it becomes clear that Rodrigo's wife is being held at the nearby docks, and there's a chance that she can be rescued. Later, this mysterious outfit gets a chance to take out Payne's helicopter with an RPG, but a member of the group lets him get away.

Rockstar is keeping characteristically quiet about where other missions will take place, although we know that environments will take in the full flavour of São Paulo, from mansions to favelas. The publisher has also confirmed that several story strands from the earlier games will continue into this one – so we can assume that the Inner Circle will be back, along with a motley crew of corrupt police chiefs, politicians, gangsters and hitmen. It seems Payne was forced out of New York, and we're going to find out exactly why. We also know that there are other characters that Payne ends up working with or protecting – putting personal relationships at the centre of the action once again.

So this looks to be what Rockstar has always promised – *Max Payne* re-interpreted and re-energised for the contemporary shooter fanatic. The lynchpin of the project is the combination of bullet-time with procedural animation, overlaying its heavy-punching storytelling with an adaptable, tactical system with bags of visual clout. It's going to be a game about feel and mechanics, of user interface and violence. To compete on these terms today, it needs to be astonishing at what it does. Considering what Rockstar has achieved already, the signs are that it won't let the game go until it is.



TEAM BONDI
SYDNEY AUSTRALIA
XBOX 360
LIVE
PS3
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HEAD HUNTER

We get a close encounter with extraterrestrial crime and punishment as the sequel to 2006's space-bending shooter Prey ditches the gravity gimmicks and goes open world

TITLE: **PREY 2** FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA SOFTWORKS** DEVELOPER: **HUMAN HEAD STUDIOS** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **2012**

A game which pipped *Portal* to portals, *Prey*'s often regarded as being ahead of its time. Now, with physics-rich gameworlds and an audience primed for stomach-spinning spatial trickery, it would seem to be the perfect time to revisit the spherical alien mothership and its reality-warping widgetry. It's a surprise, then, that the sequel spends all of five minutes on the Sphere, before whisking the player off to another world entirely, sidelining the first game's gravity wells, portals and spirit realms in the process. The second surprise is that this is hardly a disappointment.

"I didn't want it to feel like it was a mission pack," says **Chris Rhinehart**, project lead and Human Head Studios' affable, sleepy-eyed co-founder. "We'd explored a lot of the ways in which you could use portals and gravity in combat, and I really wanted to shift away from making it too much of a puzzle game. Not that there's anything wrong with that – I love *Portal*! But we wanted to take the player some place new. Portals are still part of the universe, and of the fiction, but the player won't be jumping through portals and all of that."

Perhaps a change of scene was inevitable given the explosive finale of the first game – which art director and fellow co-founder **Jim Sumwalt** summarises pithily as 'driving the brand into the sun'.

"*Prey* took place on the Sphere," explains Rhinehart. "Portals and gravity were functions of the Sphere. And of course – spoiler! – at the end of *Prey*, you blow up the Sphere. You blow up the entire gameplay space! That's gone."

"We were like, wait a minute – we want our Star Wars!" says Sumwalt. "We needed a new place that the player learns more about, that is curious about."

So, although taking place in the same universe, the two games' events, settings and structures have only tangential connections. Fans of the first will remember one of its startling set-pieces: having been abducted by the Sphere, the player sees a passenger jet plough into it and explode. The protagonist of the second game is on that aircraft – a US Marshal named Killian Samuels, en route to prison with a perp in tow. He has only a few moments to crawl from the burning wreckage and take stock of his surroundings before he's set upon by the vicious aliens known as Keepers and knocked senseless. The next thing we know, Samuels is the one human on a distant planet called Exodus. He remembers nothing since the crash, but it seems that years have passed. And he's been busy, establishing himself as a fearsome bounty hunter in the thrumming alien sin-city of The Bowery, chasing down ET ne'er-do-wells using parkour skills.

> "We've put in tons of things the player can climb up, jump off and traverse through. You can get from any point to any other point"

Samuels might not have the ghost of his childhood pet hawk for company, like the first game's eyebrow-raising Native American caricature, Tommy Tawodi, or the ability to traverse to the spirit realm – but such holes in the player's skillset are more than adequately plugged by newfound agility. *Prey 2* plucks many of the moves from *Mirror's Edge*, matching them to a more streamlined control scheme and a confrontational style of play. As a bounty hunter, you are running towards trouble, not away from it, and Samuels' abilities give you a crucial advantage in both your pursuit of aliens on the lam and in full-on combat with those who refuse to be taken alive.

We witness just how empowering these free-running skills can be during an ambush. The arena is split across two levels – a small open atrium whose far end is flanked by staircases leading up to a mezzanine. We dive straight in, taking out an enemy to the left as we skid across the floor – then, rather than climb up the conventional way, we leap between the two staircases, clinging with one hand to the mezzanine balcony as we use it as cover, blind-firing into the aliens on the other side. One still remains, hunkered down behind a pillar. We vault the balcony and throw ourself into a skid, quickly flanking the enemy and plugging him in the spine.

And this, for *Prey 2*, is a relatively static battle – most will involve many tiers and levels: every inch of the city has been layered with multiple paths of traversal in mind.

"We've put in tons of affordances," says associate producer **Matt Bisenius**. "Things the player can climb up, jump off and traverse through. You can get from any point to any other point using multiple layers of verticality." The civilian floor space is paralleled by vents, ducts, underpasses, overpasses, gantries and girders – allowing access to what Sumwalt refers to as the 'Batman Space' – the area of play from which Samuels observes his prey and establishes his superiority.

"The player can do things that empower him on this level, and the NPCs do things that empower them on the lower level of verticality," says Sumwalt, happily drawing a comparison with *Arkham Asylum*'s use of separate planes for predator and prey. "Sometimes they cross, and often they end up giving the player a way out in any given situation, when things start getting rough. You can have a tactical advantage at the drop of a hat. Or, when approaching a situation, you can try to figure out what's the best tactical advantage going in."

Alien wares

"We're trying to prevent everyone having the exact same experience," says Bisenius, pointing to the game's vast line-up of interchangeable gadgets and weapons, bringing their own strategic possibilities and upgrade options.

"Weapons will most likely be discovered, but gadgets you can purchase," he says. "There are around 20 now, and probably more to come. Combat gadgets help you kill – like grenades. There are gadgets to help capture and incapacitate, like the bolas, [and] gadgets to help pursue and navigate, like night vision or the hover-boots."

The latter example also illustrates the subtle *Zelda*-style unlocking of each city – the boots allow you to glide through the air in a gentle declining arc, traversing gaps that you would otherwise not be able to leap.

Bisenius describes the parkour system: "It's context-based stuff. If I'm jumping towards a bar, I'll grab that bar. If I look up and jump again, I'll jump to the next bar up. If I'm running towards a pipe that I want to slide under, I just hit crouch and let my momentum carry me through"

Each quarry will bring an unpredictable set of alien challenges. Some enemies can fly, others travel at super speeds, while others still are simply massive, hulking opponents. Then there are various types of shield and anti-gadget devices, like personal missile defence systems







Some missions suggest stealth, but Human Head is keen not to slap the player with a fail state for being spotted – the mission will just become more explosive. "You can always Rambo your way out," says Rhinehart

"If I wanted to be a bad guy, I could go around and shoot random citizens as well. But if you play like a jerk, the cops will come after you, and if you continue to fight, higher-level cops will teleport in"





Human Heads (from left): project lead Chris Rhinehart, art director Jim Sumwalt and associate producer Matt Bisenius

These aren't linear obstacle courses, however. In the most visibly dramatic change from its predecessor, *Prey 2* is an open-world game, with each of its cityspaces occupying an area equivalent to one of those from *Assassin's Creed 2* – sprawling alien hubs, bustling with a diversity of species. They are far from futuristic utopias of gleaming chrome citadels, however. *Prey 2* approaches a grubbier, more decrepit futurism: The Bowery is a colossal clutter of seedy alleys, crisscrossing gantries and flickering neon. Being tidally locked to its star, Exodus has no day-night cycle; advertising blimps circle in the Bowery's perpetual twilight, and shady characters huddle in darkened stairwells, cutting deals and exchanging secrets. The influence of Blade Runner is writ large here, and Sumwalt has coined the term 'Alien Noir' to describe the efforts at world building – establishing a darkly seductive world soused with intrigue.

Pure shooter mechanics wouldn't be able to articulate the texture of this living, breathing place, and so *Prey 2* fleshes out the player's interactions with a degree of RPG-lite choice and advancement.

"We wanted to go through and expand the set of actions the player has," says Rhinehart. "As a bounty hunter, I can wander around, take different jobs or try to find activities going on in the world."

These dynamic events are easy to seek out by flicking on your visor. The HUD then picks out nearby lifeforms in bright colours, helping you to distinguish item-vendors from mission-givers, hostiles, friendlies and other people of interest. Spot a fellow in green having his head kicked in and you may choose to intervene, reaping some small reward from the grateful party. Or you may prefer to be the one doing the kicking; threatening locals by waving your gun in their face can bag you some handy space-dollars, but cause too much havoc and you may attract unwanted attention.

"If I wanted to be a bad guy, I could go around and shoot random citizens as well," says Rhinehart. "But if you play like a jerk, the cops will come after you. If you activate that security system, the best answer is to flee. It's time-based, and they're likely to give up if you get far enough away from them. There are escalation systems, too – when it first triggers, lower-level cops come out, and if you continue to fight, higher-level cops will teleport in and chase you. And if you continue, rival bounty hunters eventually turn up to take you down."

For the moment, however, we aren't interested in tussling with the boys in blue. Instead, we saunter into a bar we know to be full of low-lifes in the hopes of stumbling across a bounty. Flipping on our visor reveals a red-outlined alien – identifying him as a potential target, wanted dead or alive. The fugitive is engrossed in one of the holographic dancers and we attempt to sneak up behind him, but clearly not discreetly enough. As we draw our gun, the alien turns and spots us, immediately firing a few panicked rounds before dashing off through the screaming patrons and out of the bar. We exit through a window and run parallel to the fleeing villain, exploiting the scenery to gain some ground before flinging a bolas to bring him down.

"There are two main types of chases and a lot of variance underneath that," says Rhinehart about the systems that define where a bounty will attempt to flee. "A free chase sees the enemy take off and find the most efficient route away from you. He doesn't always necessarily have an end-point – he has an 'I want to get the hell away from you' point. The other type of chase has a few more scripted elements – not necessarily in terms of the exact route, but in terms of where he's going – he's got a destination in mind. We can string a number of those together – so he's going to the docks, then the market, then try to head to an escape ship. So that's how we can put in ambushes – we know he's going to get here unless you capture or kill him beforehand."

The fugitives won't hang around, either – unlike *Assassin's Creed*'s obligingly tardy quarries, aliens don't stop for a breather. They can escape – although Rhinehart suggests there may be less visible systems which, adjusting for the difficulty level, make targets easier to capture. This fellow has no such luck, and barely has time to rasp a declaration of his innocence before we coldly execute him.



"We are still *Prey*," Bisenius says. "Part of that is the grotesque, the surprising alien beasts, but a lot of the weapons [above, including Samuels' US Marshal pistol modified with alien technology] and effects will speak to the first game's 'holy shit!' moments." We ask if Sumwalt was disappointed by *Prey*'s reception, given all its new ideas. "One could say it had *too* many interesting ideas!" he says



Smoke and mirrors

Ridley Scott's Blade Runner is a clear inspiration, but Sumwalt and his art team have found more subtle ways of evoking the film noir aesthetic.

"It's not so much about having long shadows and blinds and those classic noir motifs," he says. "We focus on gloss and specularity. In other open-world games – like *Red Dead Redemption* – things tend not to be very shiny. Shiny is expensive [from a rendering perspective]. But because our world isn't *super* expansive – it's big enough for one guy to move through quickly and efficiently on foot – we have the ability to splash colour around and reflect light. If you look into noir, you see they use a lot of mirrors, rain and puddles – we have a lot of glossy alien surfaces that play to that imagery."

Apparently players of the first game didn't dig Tawodi's 'reluctant hero' shtick, and simply found him whiny. Samuels (left), meanwhile, is largely unvoiced during the action, his narration reserved for audiologs you uncover to flesh out the backstory





Alongside the bounty missions are escort duties, collect quests and other variations. Rhinehart stresses that the escort missions, in particular, avoid the usual frustrations, ensuring that you don't need to babysit frail characters

More important targets (selected via a roster of available jobs, rather than spotted in the field) are often wanted alive, however, and are far more slippery opponents. Some are accompanied by heavily armed henchmen, while others possess unnerving alien abilities and technologies that thwart your gadgetry. You never know quite what you're letting yourself in for – although the scanning vision mode is useful for giving you a brief heads-up on the potential situation. In our case, Samuels doesn't even know where to find his next target, and our mission handler suggests we shake down an information broker. The creep won't spill the details unless we hand over 2,000 credits. We don't have 2,000 credits, unfortunately, but we do have a gun, and decide to ditch the script and fire it directly at the alien's bodyguard. He tumbles over the balustrade to the streets below. Suddenly, the information broker is willing to alter the terms of the deal – a neat illustration of the greater flexibility and depth of this open world.

We head over to the several-storey-high club in which our quarry is said to be holed up. With our climbing skills, we could scale the building and try and enter from the roof, or find a ventilation duct to clamber through. Instead, we head to the back entrance, but find it locked. A quick scan identifies a local thug as one of our target's lieutenants, and by approaching from behind and drawing our gun, we are able to take him hostage and use him to unlock the door. Our target isn't happy to see us, and our thug-shaped shield is quickly perforated by bullets as a number of henchmen open fire. After dispatching these goons we give chase, but find ourselves at a disadvantage – this alien is capable of teleporting over short distances, allowing him to cross gaps (which we must circumnavigate) and slip out of our bolas traps. The chase is a protracted one, broken up as henchmen flood into areas to block our pursuit. Fortunately, our shoulder-mounted rockets – among the 20-plus gadgets available to the player – prove useful in clearing out the fleshier obstacles in our path; later we tear an entrenched chaingunner from cover with an anti-gravity wave (similar to *Mass Effect 2*'s Shockwave power) and then splatter him with a railgun as he slowly floats into the air.

Eventually we chase our target down at the edge of the city, where he's faced with capture or leaping into the abyssal depths of the spaceport. He says he can make us a better offer than our employer.

"We're not going with true dialogue trees," clarifies Rhinehart. "There's RPG-lite stuff in terms of player choice and player progression and ramifications – but not through dialogue trees. We do have a proposal system, however, which is mostly binary: yes or no, A or B. In one of the missions I like a lot, you're asked to go and kill a guy, but he gets in contact with you and says: 'You know what, I'll pay you a little bit more if you go and kill the guy who hired you'. You might get more money – but it could be a trap."

Such decisions also affect your reputation. Like the Fame system in *Red Dead Redemption*, your reputation builds over the course of the game – though here its incrementation is largely attached to significant plot beats rather than being sent into spasms by every bit of collateral damage. Your perception as either an honourable, if ruthless, bounty hunter or back-stabbing crazy-man will have knock-on effects, minor examples of which are that vendors are more likely to offer you a discount, and other NPCs will freak out when you draw weaponry near them.

In this case, however, we opt to see our contract through – and we prepare the target to be sent to our employer; fizzing electric shackles pin the fugitive in the air while a portal opens to swallow him. But then there's a call – it appears that, in our amnesiac state, we may have overlooked the potential repercussions of this particular mission. The target's brother is none too pleased at our betrayal of his family, and his revenge is swiftly incoming: *Prey 2* sees you play both sides – hunter and occasionally hunted. Perhaps it's time we left.

The Bowery is just one of several destinations you'll explore on Exodus, with

> "You're asked to kill a guy, but he says: 'I'll pay you more if you go and kill the guy who hired you'. You might get more money – but it could be a trap"

the half-lit slums and clubs giving way to an industrial underworld and, later, the metropolitan Brightside. Human Head won't be drawn on the larger plot – but we suspect the prisoner Samuels was transferring may appear again and even Tommy Tawodi may still be a factor. To ditch so many of the first game's features is certainly an unexpected twist – but Human Head has past form in the unexpected; the occasional brilliance of *Prey*'s scene-setting and its frequently elegant physics gimmicks have largely gone unsaluted. Perhaps this is because, for all its stomach-churning tricks, *Prey* was still a linear FPS, dependent on scripting. With a dense open world, dynamic chases and the many permutations of combat apparatus, *Prey 2* is a far more radical shooter – an ambition which Human Head appears well-equipped to chase down.



The first game was about Tawodi rediscovering his spiritual heritage, says Rhinehart, and the subsequent collision between that and the aliens. This theme will not be revisited – there will be no death-walk or ancestral spirit guides


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Carbon Altered
Mistercrayon
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Tempestora
Laddergoat
Speedhaak
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MotoSeventy
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CyberRazorCut
FieryBiscuits
MattTheSurveyor

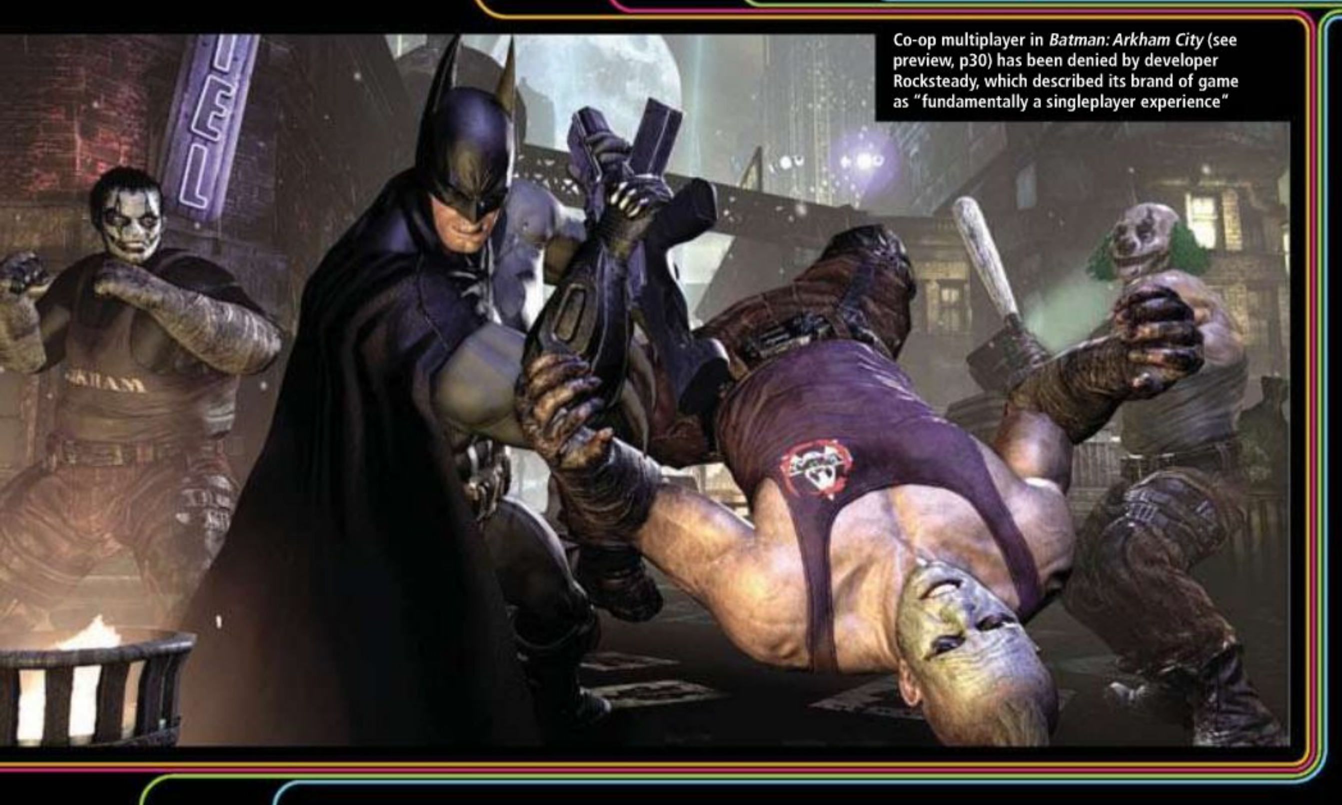


CONSOLE MULTIPLAYER IS NOT FOR EVERYONE, AND SOMETIMES NOT FOR ANYONE. IS IT TIME TO QUESTION THE SANITY OF TODAY'S COLLECTIVE CULTURE?

If multiplayer, not motion control or the plastic guitar, is to be the story of this console generation, it won't be because of money, popularity or influence, but rather its ability to begin each chapter with a different heading. 'The Rise Of Online Gaming', 'The Rise And Rise Of *Call Of Duty*', 'The Co-Op Years' and 'The Curious Case Of *BioShock 2*'. It's a fast-moving drama in which the stakes grow higher and the future's never certain; who wouldn't want to know what happens next?

How about these people? The players of *The Lord Of The Rings: The Battle For Middle-earth* and its sequel, who recently learned that EA's licensing deal with New Line Cinema had expired, leading to the permanent shutdown of the game's online servers. Producer John Vignocchi, who publicly blasted Midway executives for imposing multiplayer 'no one wanted' on *Stranglehold*. *Crysis 2* fans who didn't order a massive portion of *COD* with their deathmatch. Pretty much anyone who played *Turok*, *Condemned 2: Bloodshot*,





Co-op multiplayer in *Batman: Arkham City* (see preview, p30) has been denied by developer Rocksteady, which described its brand of game as "fundamentally a singleplayer experience"



The Darkness, *Haze*, *Brütal Legend*, *Aliens Versus Predator*, *Lost Planet 2*, *Starship Troopers*, *Soldier Of Fortune: Payback*, *Hour Of Victory* or *Rogue Warrior*, to name but a few.

For those and many others, the story of multiplayer prompts a tougher question: who's calling the tune? Who decides that a solitary, atmospheric experience like *Dead Space* or *BioShock* needs online arena battles? Or that *COD*-based multiplayer in *Homefront* is so crucial that its vaunted story mode need only be five hours long? Them? Us? *Anyone?* We want answers.

Julian Widdows is an executive producer at Activision who, with *Cold Winter* and Wii's *GoldenEye 007* on his CV, has worked on the spiritual and actual successors to one of the most important multiplayer games ever made. "What's been happening for a number of years is this ongoing dialogue about: should you include multiplayer in the game anyway, because without it your game's not sticky? It's not going to stay in the gamers' hands and they'll trade it in next week," he says. "And there's absolutely no doubt, whether you use sales data, online league tables or just chat to store managers, that games that don't have compelling multiplayer get traded in much more quickly that those with multiplayer, or with compelling DLC coming down the pipe later on.

"There are all sorts of analytics out there, but what nobody can tell you – *nobody* – is what will happen if you don't include multiplayer in a game, and what will happen if you do. And once that game's shipped, no one can tell you what would have happened either way. All people can use is supposition around the figures. It's one of the burning questions: we need to understand why the consumer's doing what they're doing. We kind of know – we can make some assumptions – but what is driving these trade-in decisions? Is the perception of longevity and depth helping certain games remain sticky? Is that dependent on the quality of the singleplayer game?"

Stretching far beyond the rent-a-quote analysts who chime in on anything newsworthy, the influence of analytics on publishing decisions cannot be overstated. One such agency is market research firm EEDAR, which offers exhaustive metrics and sales forecasts for the global games industry; in its words: "A suite of services designed from scratch to increase profitability for individual video game titles". Its services are largely bespoke, but it does offer a contextually accurate example document for its DesignMetrics report.

"Co-operative multiplayer with a variety of options may increase review score," reads an entry under the section labelled 'Opportunities'. Under another, 'High Review Score Anticipated': "Example Game will need a high review score to compete in the shooter genre… Acclaimed shooters contain a strong singleplayer campaign, robust multiplayer with multiple modes, smooth engine, and cutting edge graphics. Shooter titles that do not deliver a high quality experience in all aspects of gameplay struggle against stiff competition."

And here, most pointedly, is the section describing mutliplayer: "Example game features online and offline twoplayer multiplayer co-operative gameplay. Co-operative gameplay is an increasingly common feature in triple-A console titles, especially in the shooter genre. Examples of high-profile shooter released recently that feature co-operative multiplayer as a major feature include *Call Of Duty: World At War*, *Left 4 Dead 2*, *Borderlands*, *Gears Of War 2* and *Halo: ODST*. These titles all received high review scores and had strong retail sales. Co-operative multiplayer is fast becoming a standard feature in high selling, triple-A shooters on seventh-generation consoles."

While it's worth pointing out that a complete EEDAR study goes into extraordinary depth, remarking on the naming conventions of Achievements and Trophies, model polygon counts and the apparent age of avatars, its contents are generally additive. It lists and counts features – online and offline multiplayer capability (player counts), game types, etc – but, as Widdows implies, only deals in hypotheses based on market data. It offers publishers in-house reviews of early code, by which point a decision like multiplayer support should be history.

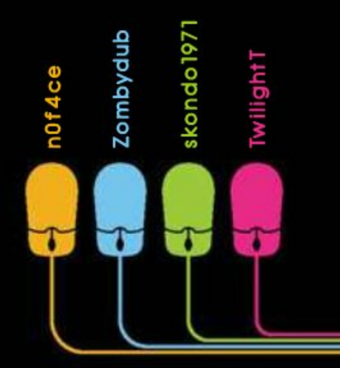
Threatening to become even more synonymous with services like Xbox Live, the marketing man's current star, *Black Ops*, trumpeted 600 million multiplayer hours (and 20 million players) eight weeks after release. Global sales passed $1bn in 42 days, making it the kind of monster, says Gearbox president **Randy Pitchford**, that's turned the multiplayer question into a numbers game. "Let's forget about what the actual promise of a game is and whether it's suited to a narrative or competitive experience," he says. "Take that off the table for a minute and just think about the concept-free feature list: campaign, competitive, co-op, how many players? How many guns? How long is the campaign? When you boil it down to



Julian Widdows, executive producer at Activision and director of *Cold Winter*







All eyes are on *Dead Space 2*, one of very few sequels to recapture all that made its predecessor great yet add, for the express purpose of boosting sales, a decent multiplayer mode. Sales of two million units in its first week can be largely put down to increased marketing spend and brand awareness. The true test of multiplayer will come with server numbers and DLC sales

that, you take the ability to make good decisions out of the picture. And the reason they do it is because they notice that the biggest blockbusters offer a little bit for every kind of customer. You have people that want co-op and competitive, and players who want to immerse themselves in deep fiction.

"But the concept has to speak to that automatically; it can't be forced. That's the problem. So, when the publisher is thinking, 'When I put my money in, I don't know what's going to come out, but I know what I want the low and high numbers to be and I want the high number to be as high as possible', fundamentally he's gambling. He's a money guy, has no creative investment. He's just putting money on the table and wants a return. For him, the worst case scenario is that he just gets it back."

At the risk of painting a black-and-white picture, you could argue that while ceiling of like four or five million units if everything works perfectly in your favour. [*Dead Space* hit 1.4 million globally in six months; *Black Ops* hit 5.6 million in a day.] So the bean counters go: 'I like that people like it. I like the scores. But how do I get a higher ceiling?' And they look at games that have multiplayer.

"They're wrong, of course. What they should do instead is say that they're comfortable with the ceiling, and get as close to the ceiling as possible. Put in whatever investment's required to focus it on what the promise is all about. The promise with *Dead Space* isn't competing with your friends, it's immersing yourself in a really interesting story and place, with some really clever gameplay design there. And that's great. They should just embrace that."

They often don't, of course, just as 2K didn't with the entirely comparable *BioShock 2*. To their credit, both games

"THE PROMISE WITH DEAD SPACE ISN'T COMPETING WITH YOUR FRIENDS, IT'S IMMERSING YOURSELF IN A REALLY INTERESTING STORY AND PLACE, WITH SOME REALLY CLEVER GAMEPLAY"



GENERAL INFANTRY

The blinding success of *Call Of Duty* makes it hard for developers, publishers and players to see beyond. If and when its iterative blend of game types loses its appeal, then, what does the online shooter of the future look like? Wedgwood and Hines will tell you it's not multiplayer and it's not singleplayer, it's 'mingleplayer'. "It's a whole second level of things that in some ways support and tie into having a good multiplayer experience," believes Hines. "The teamplay aspect, the customisation aspect, the aspect of having your character persist across singleplayer, co-op and multiplayer. I jump in, play by myself, and once I'm done I'm still able to use that character and all the things I've unlocked, and much better prepared for what it's like to play a multiplayer game because I'm doing the same things. That's not usually the case."

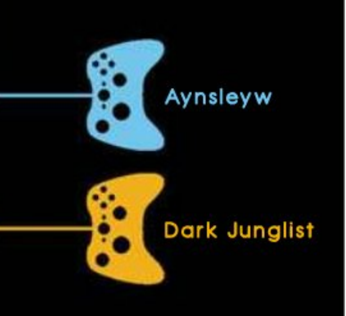
it's the artist's job to gamble with a publisher's money, it's the publisher's to gamble with the artist's integrity. Nowhere is this clearer than in the current multiplayer climate, where a series like *Dead Space*, conceived as something of a skunkworks project in a creative vacuum, becomes subject to the expectations of the world's all-singing, all-dancing blockbusters.

"*Dead Space* was probably a profitable game, but it's ceiling-limited; it'll never do 20 million units," says Pitchford. "The best imagining is a peak

defied the sceptics by delivering solid singleplayer modes to which the controversial multiplayer was happily irrelevant. Many, in fact, such as Ruffian Games' level designer **Sean Noonan**, would even go one further.

"Some people hated *BioShock 2*'s multiplayer; I was one of the people who loved it," he tells us. "But I only played it for a short amount of time because the community disappeared. I think my copy was sent out a little early so I was playing it with that type of community – late reviewers or whatever – and it was great. But as soon as that started to dip or the next big release came out, everyone flocked somewhere else and you were stuck with the same high-level people. It just didn't keep its community. It died."

It's no surprise that not all multiplayer games enjoy long and prosperous lives. And while publishers have little sympathy for latecomers buying from the preowned market – initiatives like EA's 'Project Ten Dollar' and its Online Pass actively oppose it with single-user incentives and multiplayer access – there is a legitimate grievance there. What if you hear about









Top: Paul Wedgwood, co-founder of Splash Damage. Above: Bethesda's vice president of public relations, Pete Hines

a game late, buy it new, and find that its much-hyped multiplayer is effectively useless? We did a bit of quick-and-dirty anecdotal research to find out.

Test subject one: *Ghostbusters: The Video Game*, released in 2009. We picked this one because it literally fell off the shelf while writing the list, reminding us that the multiplayer was actually a lot of fun, making good use of the obvious team dynamic of the IP. But with no server browser in the game, the multiplayer's limited to the usual 'ranked' and 'player' matchmaking which, at the two times of the day we tried it (morning and evening), drew blanks on two separate days. Host your own game and find your own Egon, then, because this online game is dead.

Test subject two: *FEAR 2: Project Origin*, another 2009 game with a decent multiplayer mode notable for succeeding *FEAR: Combat*, one of the few experiments in handing out a multiplayer game for free to help build a boxed IP. The test conditions were the same: two separate times, two separate days. The best result: four available games and 16 players between them, dropping to three games after one had been played.

BioShock 2, finally, reliably served up six players for a free-for-all deathmatch on all four occasions within 30 seconds. An achievement of sorts, especially considering that at least four players were of the same level as our multiplayer profile, making it the only game of the three to feature effective matchmaking. None of the game's other modes fared so well, and all but one entered a loop of players entering and leaving the lobby before a game could start. One seemed so elated at the sight of another player that he instantly sent a friend invite.



One problem with multiplatform multiplayer is that few studios are big enough to tackle every version, placing them at the mercy of thirdparty ports. *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* saw lacklustre ports by Nerve (360) and Z-Axis/Underground Development (PS3)

"THE THING ABOUT MULTIPLAYER IS THAT IT'S NOT ABOUT JUST RELEASING A GAME AND HOPING PEOPLE PLAY IT. YOU NEED TO UPDATE IT ONCE A MONTH FOR THE NEXT FIVE MONTHS"

Paul Wedgwood, founder of *Brink* developer Splash Damage, lets out a sigh: "The thing about multiplayer as a concept is that it's not about just releasing a game and then watching and hoping people play it. You have to release the game, then you need to update it once a month for the next five months. You need to run a community site, forums, and build a fansite kit. Then you need to go out to every tournament worldwide and get them to run a tournament for your game. Then you have to go to all of the top clans and do friendly matches, give them early access to the game, get consultation from them, get them involved in the closed beta early so your competitive mode is really good. Because that's really what supports a game for years: clan play and competitive play. All the big games – *Halo*, *Gears Of War*, *Call Of Duty*, *Enemy Territory*, *Quake III* – have had longevity because they've had all of that."

In cynical times it's easy to forget that people don't just play multiplayer games for fun: every once in a while, they *make* them for that reason, too. Splash Damage is a prime example, a passionate and focused former mod-making team obsessed with class-based multiplayer games, inspired in the early days by the multiplayer in *Return To Castle Wolfenstein*. It made a map for it, Market Garden, which it claims became the most popular thirdparty map in the world. Then it made three more maps bundled with *RTCW*'s Game Of The Year edition, one of which, Tram Siege, became the most popular firstparty map in the world.

Among the features *RTCW* helped to popularise were asymmetrical maps with attacking and defending teams, the idea of medics reviving players, and synchronous spawns with spawn timers to create waves of attack. Wedgwood: "It was really approaching a singleplayer feel but in a multiplayer experience – and this was really the genius of Kevin Cloud over at id Software and Robert Duffy, and Brandon James and the guys at Nerve. There was this very incestuous kind of foundation for everything that was being created, and we just absolutely loved what we were doing."



FREEDOM ISN'T FREE

FEAR Combat wasn't the only time a complete multiplayer game was released for free to promote an IP. *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory* was released for free in 2003 due to problems with the game's singleplayer mode, and the practice has evolved considerably into the free-to-play model of games like *Battlefield Heroes* (above). But these are PC games, and *Heroes* knows much about console multiplayer inertia. "The great thing about the PC for us is we can control the website, we can control all of the transactions, all of the advertising, we can tailor the service," said executive producer **Ben Cousins** to VideoGamer.com. "If we went on 360 we would have to go through the MS process. Every time we added new content it would have to go through all of the MS vetting processes, it would go through their billing system. We really want to control this."





even breaks through. Interestingly, the 1.4m-selling first week enjoyed by *New Vegas* matches that of EA's *Medal Of Honor* reboot, a title built to both challenge and emulate the success of *Call Of Duty* with its heavily promoted multiplayer. Bethesda, you suspect, was probably happier with its outcome.

"There has never, ever been a meeting we've sat in with any developer where we've insisted upon including multiplayer where it wasn't planned," insists Bethesda marketing boss **Pete Hines**. "And beyond that, I have personally regularly questioned whether or not it *needed* to be included if it was. I've always said: 'You tell us whether or not your game needs it. I'm not going to tell you it has to be on there, or it has to be a bullet on the back of the box. If that's the reason you're doing it then don't waste your time and don't waste ours'."

Apparently this tends to surprise people used to being "pushed to check this box and that one". Does Hines tire of being asked if *The Elder Scrolls* will get multiplayer? "It does get old," he admits.

"It's not wrong or unreasonable for people to want to experience a game with their friends, or do things with folks online. There's nothing wrong with that at all. What we've tried to do is help people understand that in game development it's all about trade-offs. One of our mantras here is that you can do anything – you just can't do everything. So certainly we could do multiplayer. Unquestionably. It's not a thing we're technically incapable of figuring out. But when we draw up the list of things we'd have to cut or change in order to support that feature, what we end up with is unpalatable. It'd make a lesser version of the game. And there is no doubt on the dev side that that is the case."

Not everyone thinks like this, sadly, and Pitchford has a theory which involves us. No, not us gamers. *Us*. "Journalists," he reminds us, "when they hear a pitch for the first time, are trying to figure this new property out, and sooner or later they're going to ask the question: is there multiplayer? All they're trying to do is figure out what to communicate to their readers, but it's often not editorialised, it's just put out there and then the response is used to figure out where the buzz is. Journalists are just trying to grab the information and be entertained by its consumption.

"Unfortunately, what the guys who are offering it hear is: 'Oh my God, we have no multiplayer and everyone's asking about it'." He laughs: "No, no, no – they don't *know* what they want yet because they don't know what you're giving them. But the guys in marketing, sales and PR, when you ask them



And, as he battles away on labour of love *Brink*, Wedgwood insists that it's business as usual. "If the multiplayer has integrity – it's not for the money, it's not for independence, it's not to get away from your bosses or whatever else – you have a higher chance of success. It's difficult to talk about why publishers bolt on multiplayer modes, but I love the fact that Bethesda [Splash Damage's owner and publisher] don't. And they never, ever do it. They make the game that they set out to make. They couldn't care less whether people think you won't get an extra three or four review score points – and that's not actually borne out by the review scores anyway."

A quick check of the retail buyer's favourite website Metacritic doesn't argue. Metascore for *BioShock* on Xbox 360: 96; for *BioShock 2* on 360: 88. *Dead Space* on 360: 89; *Dead Space 2*: 90, with the following snippet from Giant Bomb sat among the prominent '100 per cent' reviews: "The multiplayer doesn't seem especially deep, though, and consequently I suspect it will lose its lustre after a week or two. The good news is the campaign alone is worth playing through two or even three times." *Assassin's Creed II* on 360: 90; *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* on 360: 89. This should be the worst way imaginable of validating multiplayer even if the scores were different, but sadly it's ingrained on the public and the industry.

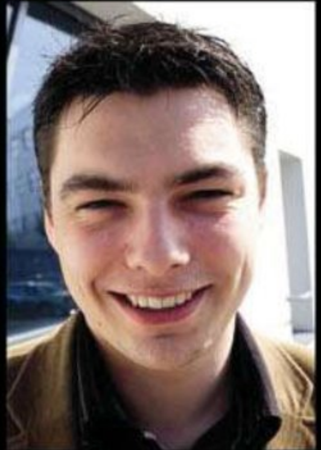
Wedgwood's right, though: Bethesda does know better. With over 4.7m copies of *Fallout 3* sold and over 5m of *Fallout New Vegas*, it sits snugly and contentedly against Pitchford's ceiling, and sometimes



Ill-fated studio Endrant discovered just how thankless it can be to work on bolt-on multiplayer with 2009's *Wolfenstein*. Unlike the singleplayer, multiplayer used the *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* engine, making it a perfect fit for the Splash Damage alumni. After launch, Endrant laid off most of its staff and hasn't made a game since







Producer James Cope (top) and level designer Sean Noonan (above), both from *Crackdown 2* studio Ruffian Games

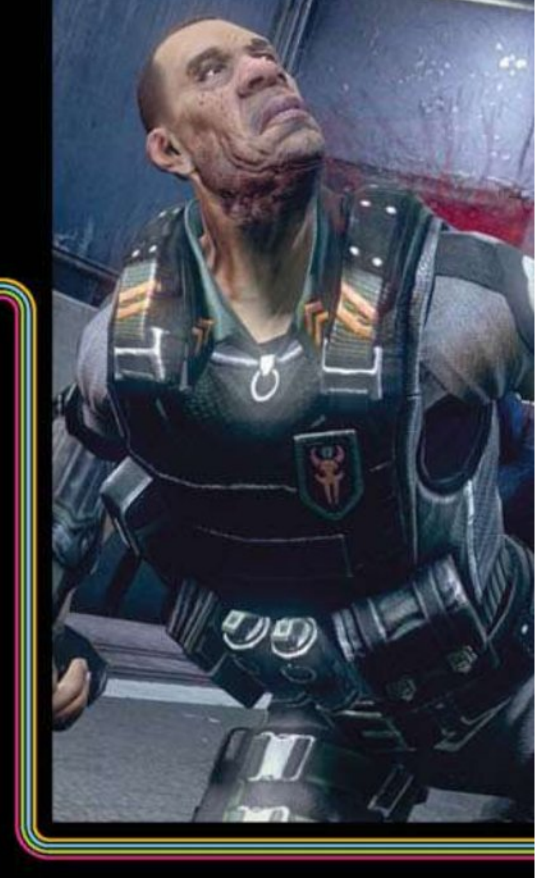
questions that have to say 'no' to, they think they're behind."

Widdows makes the point that it's better, critically speaking, to have a good singleplayer game than one hampered by bad multiplayer: "You're only as strong as your weakest part – that's the balance you're always working with." It's certainly better from a PR perspective, as Rocksteady discovered when the singleplayer-only *Batman: Arkham City* set tongues wagging for precisely that reason. Multiplayer would have "split the development effort," said marketing manager **Dax Ginn** to Gamerzines.com, and "ended up with us making two pretty average games. It's quite a trend at the moment to have multiplayer, but if it doesn't fit it can feel a little bolted on. To create something that would have felt crowbarred in and that would have ultimately compromised the thing that we're passionate about, all those signs said to us this is not something we should do."

From a business perspective, though, Widdows remains fascinated by the question of whether multiplayer might actually drive sales regardless of critical praise; regardless, even, of people actually playing it. "Even if it's not their cup of tea, if a good-quality competitive experience is in there, does that increase stickiness?"

No mention, you'll notice, of EEDAR's beloved co-op, and not because he's forgotten. Far from it. Remembering his time as creative director of Swordfish Studios, he describes how its THQ-published thirdperson shooter *50 Cent: Blood On The Sand* was forced to choose between two distinct types of multiplayer – and in his opinion chose wrongly. "We were running out of resources midway through development," he reveals, "the licensor had made some late and costly requests, and we didn't have enough to put against co-operative and competitive multiplayer. And we really felt that with the whole G-Unit thing, co-op was the key. But when it came to retail, in retrospect competitive would have been better because, generally speaking, it seems a lot of consumers want that experience in their games.

"There are so many distractions vying for people's attention: Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, numerous news channels and whatever forums and blogs people follow. And there's a contract between players in co-op: you agree to play for a certain amount of time. I've played drop-in/drop-out games and they can be very frustrating, but I feel no real guilt when I drop out in competitive multiplayer. And you can understand why."





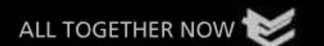
Pitchford advises against prejudging the multiplayer potential of a singleplayer IP, reminding us that *Half-Life* multiplayer introduced a set of interfaces which formed the bedrock of *Counter-Strike*. There's no reason to think a *Mirror's Edge* multiplayer mode wouldn't work, but to claim it would have 'fixed' the game is way off base

For a studio like Ruffian Games, famous for its role, as part of Realtime Worlds, in creating co-op masterpiece *Crackdown*, this is a serious issue. A literally game-changing one, perhaps, for anyone banking on that contract remaining popular despite fierce competition for precious time. It can't yet talk about its top-secret projects, but expect a quite dramatic change of approach, if not target. "Obviously we can't compete with *COD*; we've made that decision, there's no point trying," says producer **James Cope**. "So we're looking at ways of bringing that entertainment into the middle ground more. *Crackdown 2* was a good first attempt but we haven't succeeded yet – but don't think that'll stop us trying."

The middle ground is a hot topic. To wit: between the supremacy of *Call Of Duty* and the polar alternative of what Cope calls the "so indie it hurts" brigade, what is there? We're used to all the hand-wringing over gaming's endangered marginal titles, but does the same relate to multiplayer? While the PC reasserts itself as a place for digitally distributed, sustainable innovation, whither console?

"There's a very real risk," argues Cope. "I do look at the middle ground and wonder if we're seeing less. I don't think it's because of multiplayer, but the state of the market at the moment – there's a general hesitancy about investment in everything. I really lament the fact that everyone tried to chase those people looking for the pinnacle of interest, because there's space for it all."

Widdows agrees: "There are certainly channels where inventive multiplayer experiences will find an audience, but in







Brink's lengthy development might yet pay off, and not just for its blend of single- and multiplayer combat, pervasive customisation and narrative. It's the 'first-movers', notes Cope, who will conquer the console multiplayer space

terms of your mainstream boxed product we're seeing it already. Server populations for the marginal titles are non-existent in any real sense, so you look at it and go: 'Actually, if we could put all that effort into making the singleplayer game robust, then why not?' Who doesn't want to make their game better if they can? When we have dev splits of the size we've been discussing [his last title, *GoldenEye 007* for Wii, dedicated over a third of its staff to multiplayer], I think it's an inevitability."

The silver lining to all this is that, at the other end of the spectrum, the pointless and derivative could eventually be squeezed out, if not by necessity then through enlightenment. Bad multiplayer, Cope believes, might just as much be a hangover of consoles simply going online in the first place. "Where things get confused is that we're in an online space, and online generally moves towards multiplayer. It's just something people take for granted. Their thoughts are that the games industry really pushed online because of multiplayer, and that's why it became so important."

"WHERE THINGS GET CONFUSED IS THAT WE'RE IN AN ONLINE SPACE, AND ONLINE GENERALLY MOVES TOWARDS MULTIPLAYER. IT'S SOMETHING PEOPLE TAKE FOR GRANTED"

It would certainly go some way to explaining the recent, widely broadcasted words of EA Games label president **Frank Gibeau**, whose partial misrepresentation says much about gamers' fears and frustrations. In the aftermath of CEO John Riccitiello's attempt to freshen up the publisher's portfolio – the results being an underperforming *Mirror's Edge*, the conundrum of *Dead Space* and losses for 12 successive financial quarters – Gibeau has had to restore shareholder confidence. Speaking to Develop about *Mirror's Edge*, he confessed: "There were issues with the learning curve, the difficulty, the narrative, and then there was no multiplayer either." Which elicited the following response from one online observer: "When further questioned, Gibeau had this to say about his toaster: 'Although I'm happy with the way it makes toast, the crumb tray is difficult to clean and it lacks multiplayer'."

Widdows doesn't buy it, either. "Multiplayer wasn't *Mirror's Edge*'s problem," he says. "It didn't have aspirational, accessible gameplay for core gamers to get. When people have to think too hard to get what they're buying into, they can shy away from those games. *Mirror's Edge* had some conceptual accessibility challenges with your average gamer."

Quizzed further on his regard for developer autonomy and the need for multiplayer, Gibeau has subsequently refined his philosophy. Now he stresses that "it's not only about multiplayer, it's about being connected. I firmly believe that the way the products we have are going, they need to be connected online. Multiplayer is one form of that." And later, again to Develop: "Online is where the innovation, and the action, is at."

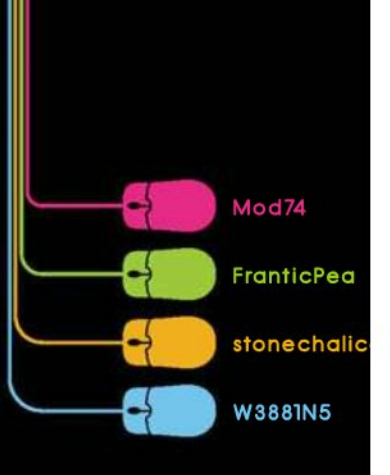
"I do think that even very insular singleplayer games have to start thinking about how they bring connectivity to friends and strangers," agrees Cope, who insists his love for Xbox Live runs separately to Ruffian's friendship with Microsoft. "As developers we have to look at ways to self-promote, and that's quite an easy way of doing it. It's socialising; I wouldn't lump it into the multiplayer space at all. There's still a place for [competitive multiplayer], and a place for people having their insular experiences. But you have to bridge that self-promotion gap in the middle."

He does advise caution, though. "We can get ourselves into these spaces where we think very rigidly about what's possible, and we sometimes just need to stop and take a breath of fresh air and think about what we're really making. Are we making distribution channels, marketing strategies or games? Because games is the important thing and it's that we have to make first. It's much harder to promote a bad game than a good one."



LINES IN THE SAND, DUDE

It's a topic brought up whenever someone reaffirms their commitment to the fighting genre, controller support on PC, or anything that blurs the line between PC and console. Why does not one triple-A title (although *Shadowrun*, above, tried) boast crossplatform multiplayer? "It's a question for the platform holders, I suppose," says Wedgwood. "There's no technical reason why, at least at the protocol level. I suppose one of the problems is that post-release, if you need to update on PS3 it would force an update on 360 and vice versa. Because you need to keep the code exactly the same to keep it pure, especially on PC where you'll do all your cheat-checking, and if they don't correlate on all your platforms you'd think someone was cheating."



Ready to play

Did you know Nintendo 3DS comes pre-loaded with an array of unique software? Its advanced technology powers entertainment experiences that simply aren't possible on any other machine. Utilising a glasses-free 3D screen, built-in 3D camera and precise motion sensors, the Nintendo 3DS is ready to play, right out of the box

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DRAGON SLAYER
Move the Nintendo 3DS to find the weak spots on this fire-breathing tabletop monster

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The 3D effect can be adjusted to suit every gamer, it can even be turned off completely



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Point the Nintendo 3DS camera at this card to activate augmented reality

CHARACTER CARDS
Place these cards on a flat surface and see Nintendo's biggest stars spring to life in 3D



"The AR stuff was amazing, as you'd expect from Nintendo"
Mathew Fuller, London

Face Raiders

This hilarious built-in game turns snapshots of your family and friends into floating 3D faces. Fend off their attacks by shooting at them



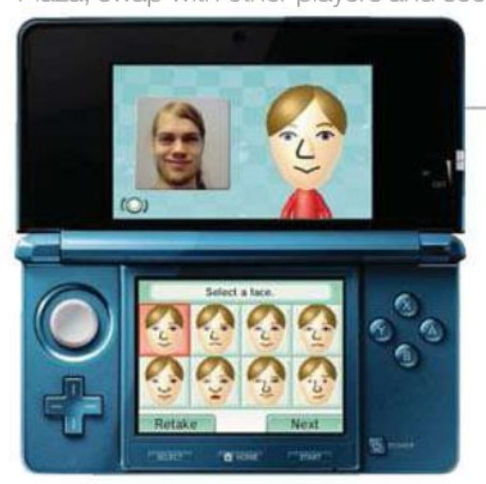
A FACE IN THE CROWD
The Nintendo 3DS snaps pictures of nearby faces as you play and integrates them into your game

THEY'RE EVERYWHERE
Faces emerge through portals in the real world!



Mii Maker

Take pictures of yourself, your friends or even famous faces from a magazine. The Nintendo 3DS will automatically convert them into Miis, which you can store in your Mii Plaza, swap with other players and see them pop up in all sorts of games





NEW FEATURES
Includes loads of brand new face parts

Mii MINIGAMES
Miis that arrive on your Nintendo 3DS from other players' consoles will bring pieces of jigsaw puzzles and even star in an RPG mode

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DEAR DIARY
Everything you do on Nintendo 3DS is recorded right here

STAT TRACKING
How long you played and how far you walked



What people are saying about Augmented Reality on Nintendo 3DS

"The way that it integrates your environment into the game is really impressive."
Mary Goodden, London



"I can't believe it – it's like it's coming out at you. I didn't even know it was possible!"
Amber Goudy, Edinburgh



"It's so much more impressive than I thought it was going to be. It's going to change everything."
Chris Jacobs, Bristol



"It's more interactive. You feel like you're more involved in the game, which is a great thing."
Matt McLeary, Edinburgh

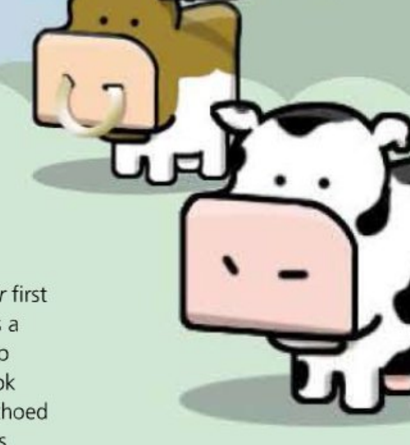


Cow poke

One university professor's playable satire of social games may have jabbed a hot brand into the eye of a goliath industry segment, but when your bovine creations begin to trample the rest of your academic legacy, is the joke on you?







Marcel Duchamp had his urinal. **Ian Bogost** has his cows. And while the grand old man of conceptual art wanted to make a complex point about art in the 20th century, hanging a utilitarian piece of porcelain in an art gallery, Bogost just started out making fun of social games. But it wasn't long before this Georgia Tech professor and distinguished academic found himself knee deep in *Cow Clicker*.

A Facebook game that asked players to click on an icon of a cow every six hours for the promise of earning a single point, *Cow Clicker* is a clear poke in the eye of every *Farmville* clone that tempts players with an endless treadmill of hollow clicking and accumulation.

Somehow the cows struck a nerve, and a year after its creation, the game has generated as many as 50,000 players a month and produced a few thousand dollars in income as cowboys and girls spend real dollars to purchase ridiculous in-game rewards. Expansions and partnerships with PopCap Games and the political game activists at Molleindustri show *Cow Clicker* stampeding to an unexpected level of cultural importance. At the very least, *Cow Clicker* is certainly no joke.

"It was very important to me that it would be real, says Bogost. "I made a commitment that it was not going to be a joke, it was not going to be a one-liner, it was really going to work."

Dressed in black, with flowing dark hair and a neatly trimmed beard, Bogost clearly relishes his Rasputin image as he sits down with us for breakfast and the opportunity to set the record straight about his cows.

Part of Bogost's charm and formidable intellectual profile comes from his apparently effortless mastery in many domains. Here's a guy who translates Greek, lectures on phenomenology and ontology, designs games, writes books and even had the chance to school television personality Stephen Colbert in the persuasive power of games on Comedy Central. Most surprising of all, he writes his own code.

Catch him giving a university lecture on his love for Atari's VCS and you're likely to observe him knocking out some assembly code live on a machine language compiler to illustrate a point about *Yar's Revenge*. No one should be surprised, then, that *Cow Clicker* is a one-man project, with Bogost slinging code, drawing cows and inventing devilish interactions for his users.

When the idea for *Cow Clicker* first popped into Bogost's head, it was a brainy insult. All he wanted was to highlight the absurdity of Facebook games whose design principles echoed Skinner Boxes, the small chambers behaviourist BF Skinner used to study operant conditioning in animals. Bogost wanted players to understand that game developers treated them like rats in a lab maze. So he built a very unfriendly game to prove the point: "One of things that interested me was: 'How many features could I add to the game without adding any gameplay?'"



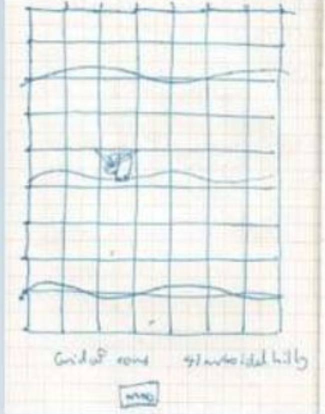
While players can somewhat optimise their clicking by adding friends to their pasture, and sharing clicks back and forth with fellow clickers, almost everything Bogost added to *Cow Clicker* provides mindless choices and pointlessly conspicuous rewards, such as earning yourself a silver cow bell with a mere 10,000 accumulated clicks.

In an industry that spoon-feeds players the easy victory, where saving the world is only a few respawns away, Bogost set out to make a point about the hard thinking that gives our lives


01
WP

An early piece of concept art from Bogost's notebook. The numbers aren't *Cow Clicker*'s version of the numerical sequence in Lost, just a needlessly complex click distribution mechanism that Bogost later abandoned











Ian Bogost is an associate professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology, and a founder of social and political game studio Persuasive Games

meaning. After boiling down the complexity of social games to its simplest form, all he had left with *Cow Clicker* was to gum up the essential pleasure of playing by asking his cow clickers to consider the complex conditions of games in modern life: "I try very hard not to give players want they want. When they asked for something I would say 'no'. And then when they pushed and pushed and pushed, I would give them the opposite of what they wanted."

So, for example, his players implored him to create and offer Cowthulu, a cute-looking cow with tentacles modelled after the HP Lovecraft beast of abject horror. When Bogost finally crafted the cow, he made it so that you couldn't buy it with accumulated clicks. Instead, you had to spend real money. And the players hated him for it.

At the thought of frustrating his players, Bogost chuckles, relishing this object lesson in making wishes and getting what you wished for, even if it wasn't what you wanted. But, much to his surprise, the players kept on playing, and kept on enjoying his increasingly problematic cow game. "No matter how much shit you throw at people, they rise above it. It's incredible how resilient people are."

"I don't know why I keep playing it," **Linda Merja Holmgren**, a player from Sweden, admits over a Facebook chat. "I like the cows, I like the people I've started chatting with through the game, I like the cow-humour. I play to escape my boring reality. Isn't that why we all play online games?"

"And she's got a point," Bogost admits. "I can't just say: 'Well, your new friends are not real friends'." As *Cow Clicker* grew in scope and popularity, the creator found that he wasn't immune to the game's bovine charms. Late nights of coding extensions and expansions while his family wondered where it would end persistently grew his cow empire into something even stranger than a smart-assed game trading points for clicking on cows.

"It's kind of a compulsion, to be honest. I have the *Cow Clicker* sickness like some of my players do," he admits.

First, he added more cows, then cow achievements, then cowfights. He published an iPhone version of the game, so players wouldn't miss a click when they were away from their computers. Before the year was out, he found an unlikely ally in PopCap co-founder **Jason Kapalka**, which led to a casual collaboration in the *Bejeweled*-inspired *Cow Clicker Blitz*.

"Is *Cow Clicker* a weird academic joke?" Kapalka muses. "Sure. But it's not like Facebook is drowning in ironic, satirical, self-referential games right now. With so many blatantly commercial or exploitative titles flooding the market, something like *Cow Clicker* is incredibly refreshing, puncturing a bit of the overinflated rhetoric and expectations."

Cow Clicker Blitz was designed as a launchpad for an even more inside jab – this time at the idea of 'gameification'.

Rather than accept the idea that game mechanics could save the world or help sell products, Bogost saw more opportunities for satire. Why gamify when you could cowclickify your applications with his Cowclickification API? Whether playing *Cow Clicker Blitz*, searching the web with a *Cow Clicker*-themed Google search page or simply posting a comment on Bogost's blog by clicking on a cow, you'd earn clicks on your account. "Wouldn't you rather post a comment by clicking a cow?" asks Bogost. "Of course you would. And you get a point!"

The heifers have increasingly become a platform for talking about – and making fun of – everything in the videogame business. The recently released *My First Cow Clicker* iPhone app gives toddlers a simple cow-matching game, and encourages parents to sweep up their children's clicks and add them to their own accounts. And, in what might be considered bordering on poor taste, Bogost teamed with Molleindustri, a political game think tank best known for its scathing satire *The McDonald's Game*, to produce Cow Clicktivisim. Players are invited to click on a cute, but emaciated, cow. The player earns a click for their *Cow Clicker* account, and when enough people click the activist cow, the Cow Clicktivisim project will donate a real cow to real people in the third world through Oxfam.

Maybe that seems callous or too self-interestedly convenient. And it probably is. But Bogost has his eye on something else. As an academic, he has taken his acid wit and surgical insight and focused his ample critical tools on himself. "I've been asking myself, why do I write?" he says. "I mean, I like writing. But why is writing the only currency of intellectual work that's worthy?"

His answer is simple. After writing four books that talked in one way or the other about the power of an algorithmic system, a game, to carry meaning and make arguments, Bogost concluded that he didn't need to rely on the crutch of words. He could make games that were



Skinner boxing

BF Skinner was an influential 20th century American psychologist known for his experiments in operant conditioning. His experimental apparatus, the Skinner Box, measured what animals did under various test conditions. In a nutshell, Skinner would condition rats to press a lever in order to receive a pellet of food. The appellation Skinner Box not only referred to the scientific apparatus used by Skinner to measure the results of these tests in support of his theories, but also fell into use in any situation where simple rewards reinforced simple behaviours. Bogost refers to social games such as *Farmville* as Skinner Boxes to emphasise how basic behaviours and reward loops seem to underlie the gameplay. Intentionally ironic, Bogost designed *Cow Clicker* as a deliberate Skinner Box, rewarding players with meaningless 'clicks' when they performed the pointless behaviour 'click on the cartoon of a cow'.









Players can invite friends to join their 'pasture', earning extra clicks from them. Charging 2,500 'mooney' for a plain cow that faces in the opposite direction offers a wry comment on the nature of desire (left), but these things can lead to mutiny



just as complex, engaging, ambiguous and revolutionary as anything he could hammer into sentence form.

And that message embodied in the mechanics of a game seems to be getting through. At least to someone like Kapalka: "*Cow Clicker* is intriguing because it's a rare example of a truly satirical game, laying bare the often ridiculous or reprehensible mechanics behind many social games."

Here, Bogost not only conjures the ghost of Duchamp's urinal, he seems ready to provide some new plumbing to take this turn-of-the-last-century idea into something that makes sense today. Where Duchamp these days suffers the innovator's paradox – so many have followed in his footsteps making broad, single-note conceptual gestures that it gets harder and harder to see why the original was so distinctive and important – Bogost wants to do more than just shock and dismay the average game fan: "Maybe *Cow Clicker* is really a platform for satire and anxiety. It took this moment in social games and sent it up in way that wasn't just a one-liner, as conceptual art."

Bogost separates *Cow Clicker* from other self-referential games that exist. Play *You Have to Burn The Rope*, and after you burn the rope, you can almost hear the cymbal. That's the punchline, and the joke lingers only as long as the theme song plays. Similarly, even *Progress Quest* or a self-deprecating epic like *Brütal Legend* only keeps the laughs coming for so long. Sooner or later, the clowning around ends and the game is over. These games bow off stage while the audience is still laughing. *Cow Clicker*, like the late, great surreal comedian Andy Kaufmann, stays in the limelight, waiting until a real angst develops in the audience, and then starts up again.

To make this point that conceptual art needs to move to a new place 100 years after Duchamp, Bogost talks glowingly of British artist Banksy. Here he sees an artist working in ambiguous spaces and consistently refusing to explain what he does, a point underlined by the recent documentary, Exit Through the Gift Shop. "That's a piece of art that does the work. You realise that I've just gone and done all this work – watching the film and researching it – only to realise that's the whole point. The point is, you can't tell the difference any more between truth and fiction. And what do I do with the fact that I can't tell the difference?"

On that point, Bogost opens himself to some fair criticism. Some question whether or not all this hoary academic philosophising actually makes it through to the player. **Scott Jon Siegel**, game designer at Playdom and frequent commenter on the social game space, has been open in questioning whether the game explains itself as well as it could. "There are a multitude of ways in which I feel Ian could have used *Cow Clicker* to better explore the potential for social games to be unlike anything else," says Siegel. "Instead, he used his academic powers for evil, and simply highlighted the absurd monetisation practices and meaningless clicking which social games are all too well known for."

In the end, Siegel worries about rhetorical mad cow disease, poisoning those that it claims to nourish: "I think *Cow Clicker* is a polished editorial on social games – one man's opinion on the lack of depth seemingly inherent with the space. My concern is that every time I see a game developer clicking a cow, I fear it means they agree."

Bogost, however, doesn't seem too worried. If *Cow Clicker* gets underneath the hide of the industry, he seems unconcerned about what that means, and whether or not it might accidentally qualify as entertainment. "Happy is not really what I am after. What I am after is a certain kind of novelty that might actually be really uncomfortable and disappointing, to show you something that you didn't see. Which is quite a bit different than contentment or happiness or fun."

And perhaps he has a point.

We've grown culturally lazy, expecting games served up in consumer-friendly packages. Bogost enjoys his breakfast and talks of the inherent self-loathing and anxiety in his cow project, gobbling up beignets in a Cajun breakfast joint in the bucolic college town of Boulder, Colorado. A couple of thousand miles from the Bayou, it never occurs just how bizarre and normal these cultural and geographic disjunctions have become in people's daily lives.

Maybe it takes a ridiculous cow game to remind us just how weird modern life has become, and how easily we've adopted our newfound home beyond the looking glass.

As Bogost ponders the future of *Cow Clicker* and looks for an inspiring idea that would let him end the game in a memorable and appropriately satirical manner, he faces the ultimate irony of a joke layered this deeply. Bogost made the cows you click, but the cows may have the last laugh: "This might be it. This might be my legacy. More people know about this than anything else that I have done."

"I think Cow Clicker is a polished editorial on social games – one man's opinion on the lack of depth inherent with the space"



Schooling Colbert

Long before Bogost dreamed up his cows, he made a national splash in the US, appearing on the Colbert Report in the summer of 2007. A popular and satirical news and entertainment parody aired daily on Comedy Central, its host Stephen Colbert is known for his goofy demeanour, quick wit and off-stage nerdy interests. He invited Bogost on to talk about his second book, Persuasive Games. While gently teasing Bogost about the idea that games can carry significant meaning, the author rolled with the jibes and made the case that the game medium could talk about important issues, and his book spelled out the details. Bogost joins a rare club of developers invited into Colbert's on-air sanctum – including *SimCity* designer Will Wright and Reality Is Broken author and AR game designer Jane McGonigal.







The compulsion to develop an iOS port of the game surprised Bogost, as he originally envisaged *Cow Clicker* as a one-off piece of interactive satire



Why we KILL

Killing has become the great videogaming pastime, but why are we so transfixed by virtual bloodshed?

After wrapping your fingers around his throat, you smash his face into a burning hot-plate and hold it firmly against the bright red steel while his skin chars and blisters. His screams hint that he's about to give in and rat on his friends. In *Splinter Cell: Conviction*, torture is a gameplay mechanic.

Put a new disc in. Now you're Ezio Auditore Da Firenze jamming knives into the throats of your family's enemies – a particularly terrifying and gruesome way to be murdered, if it's possible to rank such things.

These events are commonplace for millions of gamers around the world. There's nothing wrong with these people. They live their lives as decent men and women, productive members of society. Most of them will never even commit a crime. Yet in their leisure time they spend hundreds of dollars per year to experience ever more exotic forms of virtual violence.

In her recent book Reality Is Broken, author Jane McGonigal argues that videogame avatars allow us the opportunity to practise being the best possible version of ourselves: the version that helps people in need and accomplishes epic deeds. The avatar, however, can just as easily turn us into a monster.

Why is it that the average person abhors violence in the real world, and yet relishes the chance to actively participate in violence when it's simulated on a TV screen? What psychological processes allow peaceable gamers to commit such unspeakable acts without a second thought? Is it something deep inside us that cries out for blood? Or are killing and aggression just naturally compelling design mechanics?

There are many common answers for this, yet none are particularly satisfactory. 'Catharsis' is the explanation that pops up over and over again. However, explaining that killing in games is fun because it is cathartic is like saying ice cream is fun to eat because it's delicious. These

Killer IP #1

Thrill Kill

Developer: **Paradox Entertainment**
Year: **1998 (cancelled)**



***Thrill Kill* was first noticed for being a fourplayer fighting game set in Hell. However, its innovation didn't garner nearly as much attention as its grotesque fighting moves. Many of the fighters are deformed or have had limbs amputated.**



words (delicious and cathartic) are descriptions of the emotions that arise during the process of consumption, not explanations for their potency. Ice cream is delicious, but that fails to address the deeper, more interesting question of why humans are uniquely suited to find ice cream delicious.

So the question remains: why do we love to kill? Make no mistake about it, we do love to kill. Just two weeks after the release of *Call Of Duty: Black Ops*, players had accumulated a kill total higher than the population of the entire planet.

It's not just about graphic violence as realistic as *Black Ops*, though. Killing is omnipresent even in children's games and cherished retro classics. Even the utterly innocuous *Super Mario Bros* games feature a protagonist who spends half of the game stomping things to death and burning creatures alive just for being in his way. Even when we try not to call it killing, the same acts still pop up in a vast number of games. *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, for instance, refused to include killing in order to better reflect the Dark Knight's vow to never take a life. Yet the actual gameplay difference was purely semantic. Rather than 'killing', players spent their time bashing the heads of their enemies into concrete until they never got back up again. Surely a case of po-tay-to, po-tah-to.

"The pervasiveness of killing in games is due to the nature of the medium. It has always been easier to program death than life"

Why is it so difficult to remove killing from gameplay? "The pervasiveness of killing in games is due to the nature of the medium," says **Andrew Hicks**, professor of video game culture at Columbia College Chicago. "It is now, as it has always been, easier to program death than life."

This statement is reflected in the history of videogame development. Games that are based on death and destruction are extremely common. Games that simulate life are rarer and are far more complicated to develop into fun entertainment products. They also generally require a lot of design talent and considerable financial risk.







From top: *Soldier Of Fortune*'s Kenn Hoekstra, *Homefront*'s Richard Rouse III, and Professor Andrew Hicks of Columbia College

"It just happens that violent gameplay is something we are able to simulate very, very well, and it's easy to make fun gameplay out of it," says **Richard Rouse III**, lead singleplayer designer on Kaos Studios' *Homefront*. "On the other hand, simulating a full conversation with another human is very difficult, and it's even harder to make fun gameplay out of it that doesn't seem shallow. Even a complex game like *Mass Effect 2*, with all its emphasis on dialogue between the player and various characters, allows for far more player expression in combat than in the conversations."

There may be something about killing that is tied to the very nature of videogaming. Shooting (aiming a projectile) has been around since the earliest games because it





"Interrogation 'bashes' are shorthand for smacking someone for information, so they're designed to be visceral," says Redding of *Splinter Cell Conviction* (above)

involves several of the necessary ingredients for good game design: skill, strategy, and ample opportunities for rewarding audiovisual feedback. The 'death' of an opponent may simply be a convenient, easily communicated shorthand for 'goal completed'.

Hicks, however, says that the proliferation of killing in modern games may have just as much to do with inept storytelling. "The mechanic of killing is an easy way to create drama without having to work the narrative," he says. "Killing one person is a thrill that creates a moment of drama; killing a thousand is an even more expedient way to create excitement without a decent story."

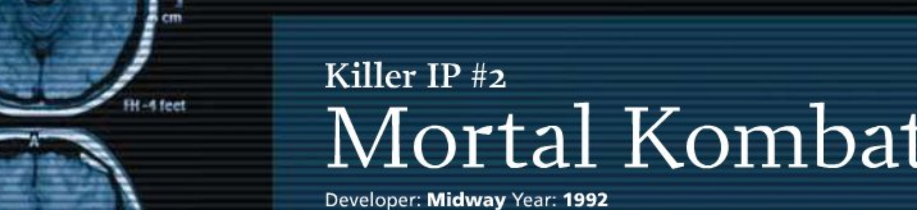
This creates an interesting chicken-before-the-egg type of quandary. Killing may be used to create drama in lieu of an effective narrative, but is the act of killing still fun and meaningful to the player if the story doesn't provide an interesting impetus and strong justification?

"I think one of the big mistakes developers make is thinking that players don't care, that they'll just shoot whatever you put in front of them," says Rouse, who is also author of the book Game Design: Theory And Practice. "Certainly those players exist, but I think they're in the minority. In general I have found players get really wrapped up in game stories as motives for their gameplay. I think players come to narrative games wanting to fulfil an aspirational fantasy of some kind, and the games that work the best provide an experience that players really want to live out. But, of course, players still need the gameplay systems to be strong or the narrative really doesn't matter." In other words, the chicken and the egg both come first.

It's never as simple as tossing in some wanton violence to fill a boring gap in the story, or beefing up the narrative so that the player can justify their violent deeds. Violent games also have to tread a thin line between fun and offensive.

Soldier Of Fortune II: Double Helix is widely considered to be one of the most violent games ever made. It was banned in several countries and is still today considered offensive to many. The reason so many gamers were turned off by *Soldier Of Fortune II* is because of the game's custom hitbox technology, dubbed GHOUL 2.0. The system allowed for an unprecedented level of detail in simulating an enemy's reaction to being shot. From that element a new system evolved for anatomically dismantling enemies bit by bit. An explosion might blow an enemy's leg off, or a shotgun could completely remove the character's head.





Killer IP #2

Mortal Kombat

Developer: **Midway** Year: **1992**



Mortal Kombat was one of the original offensive violent games. Back in 1992, parents were in uproar over the game's depiction of realistic characters being beaten, beheaded and subject to numerous other punishments. The famous 'fatality' moves came under particular scrutiny.

Killer IP #3

GTA: San Andreas

Developer: **Rockstar North** Year: **2004**



GTA: San Andreas **attracted the ire of media pundits because of its direct parallels to the depressing realities of gang violence. Though it was soon overshadowed by the Hot Coffee scandal, it was violence that first put** ***San Andreas*** **in the mass-media glare.**

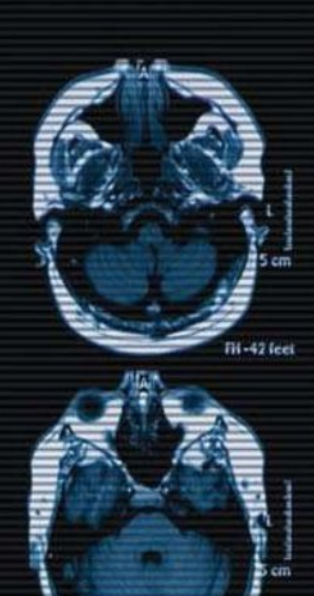
Afterwards, players could choose to continue to dismember enemies up close with a knife.

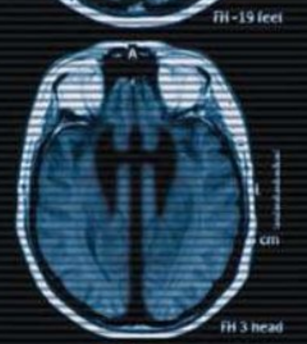
"Fans said they wanted more realism, so we tried to give them what they wanted in *Soldier Of Fortune II*," says **Kenn Hoekstra**, project administrator on both *SOF* games. "I don't think depicting the grotesqueries of war in a realistic way in a videogame makes it fun or adds much of anything to the gaming experience. Showing it just to show it isn't enhancing the gameplay; it's merely being done for shock value at that point."

This issue becomes more interesting when you consider that *Soldier Of Fortune II* was widely offensive, while *Gears Of War* (released just three years later) sold millions of copies and publicly advertised the ability to saw enemies in half with a chainsaw. What needs to happen for a game to cross the line from fun to offensive? Why does one form of over-the-top gore become a cultural phenomenon while another is considered disturbing?

Dr **Andrew Weaver** of the University of Indiana studies this effect. His research centres on media consumption with an emphasis on violent material. "In terms of enjoyment, in my research I've found that blood and gore are where most audiences will start to turn away. It's not that sanitised violence is necessarily enjoyable, but at least if there's no blood then we don't tend to be repulsed by it. But if blood is involved, particularly in realistic ways, then the natural reaction is one of repulsion."

This explanation can rather easily be extended to the













question of why a game like *Gears Of War* can get away with such ultraviolence while *Soldier Of Fortune* cannot. Even while players are spraying the screen with blood, we recognise very easily that this is nothing close to reality. *Soldier Of Fortune*'s post-mortem dismemberment likely just arouses the imagination too much for comfort. It calls to mind disturbing parallels with reality.

There are also other ways in which apparently similar levels of violence can be received with differing levels of offensiveness and repulsion. **Patrick Redding**, one of the game directors who worked on *Splinter Cell: Conviction* at Ubisoft Montreal, says he sees this kind of effect all the time. He gives us an example, comparing Activision's games *Prototype* and *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*. "The No Russian sequence was probably worse for the players who actively chose to not participate in the massacre precisely because they quickly collided with their inability to change the outcome of events," says Redding about the game's infamous level in which the player is cast as a participant in the slaughter of hundreds of innocents.

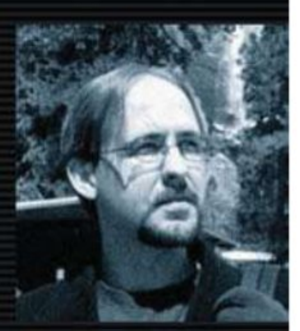
"In contrast," he continues, "when playing *Prototype* it was possible for me to unleash grotesque amounts of carnage



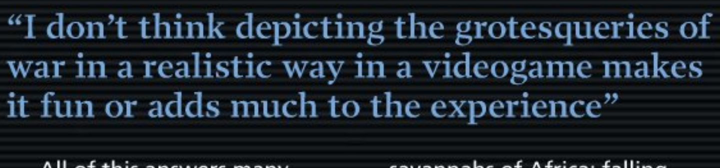

The violence of the *Assassin's Creed* games comes in controlled bursts; as in many stealth games since *Splinter Cell* (see p110), the avoidance of killing forms a large part of play

on innocent bystanders practically by accident. But because I was interacting directly with the game's systems I had a different perception of the outcome. It was still unsettling, but that originated from a place of power and responsibility instead of helplessness and fatalism. I think that it feels profoundly uncomfortable to watch violence unfolding in front of you as a passive viewer. Being a passive viewer is intrinsically uncomfortable for someone playing an interactive game."

In order to understand the roots of our fascination with virtual violence it is imperative to look back at early human history. Dr **Aaron Sell**, an evolutionary biologist formerly of the University of California, explains that there are very good reasons to believe that human psychology remains relatively consistent with that of our early ancestors: "Human phobias, to use a famous example, are exactly what you would list if you wanted to come up with dangers that face hunter-gatherers on the




Top: evolutionary biologist Dr Aaron Sell. Above: Dr Andrew Weaver of the University of Indiana


"I don't think depicting the grotesqueries of war in a realistic way in a videogame makes it fun or adds much to the experience"

All of this answers many questions as to why we discriminate between which types of violence we enjoy and which types come off as offensive. There are even some excellent reasons for why videogaming translates killing extremely well. However, the elephant in the room remains: exactly why do we find violence so entertaining?

savannahs of Africa: falling, spiders, snakes, fanged mammals, strangers, and so on. If humans were well designed for modern environments they would probably develop phobias of electric sockets, cars, fast food and swimming pools."

Modern society has existed for a mere 10,000 years at most, a trifling time scale in the grand



The No Russian sequence (above) from *Modern Warfare 2* stirred controversy, but some observers were quick to point out that gamers have been virtually killing innocents for decades. The extremities of *Soldier Of Fortune II* (above centre), meanwhile, failed to attract the same level of support

Killer IP #4

Manhunt

Developer: **Rockstar North** Year: **2003**


Memorable for the ingenious, sometimes grotesque ways in which you could dispatch enemies (often overshadowing discussions about the strength of its stealth-based core gameplay), *Manhunt* was one of the most-talked-about violent games of the '00s.

scheme of human evolution. Understanding what life was like for our ancestors is important in understanding our own basic mental wiring. In order for the species to be successful – and the human species has been very successful considering we inhabit nearly every corner of the globe – we needed to develop habits and ingrained knowledge that helped us avoid death, hence the now-useless fear of spiders that Sell talks about.

"The human mind has an appetite for viewing violence because a great deal of important but rarely available information is displayed in these fights," says Sell about prehistoric adolescents. "This is particularly true for boys who need to learn the skills of combat. Obviously, practising it in its unrestrained form is highly dangerous. This way they can observe the actions of others and learn vicariously."

Earlier, Weaver explained that young boys seem to be the ones most interested in violent content, and in this case, Sell agrees. "Boys do, in fact, practise aggression with extreme frequency," he says. "Adults will often try to strip key aspects of violence out of it, so modern sports don't look a lot like combat, but if you look at the skills involved they are still essentially practice regiments for hand-eye coordination, running speed, accuracy of throwing, strength and accuracy of weapon use – such as tennis – ability to evade others, and so on." All of which are necessary skills for surviving in the ancient world.

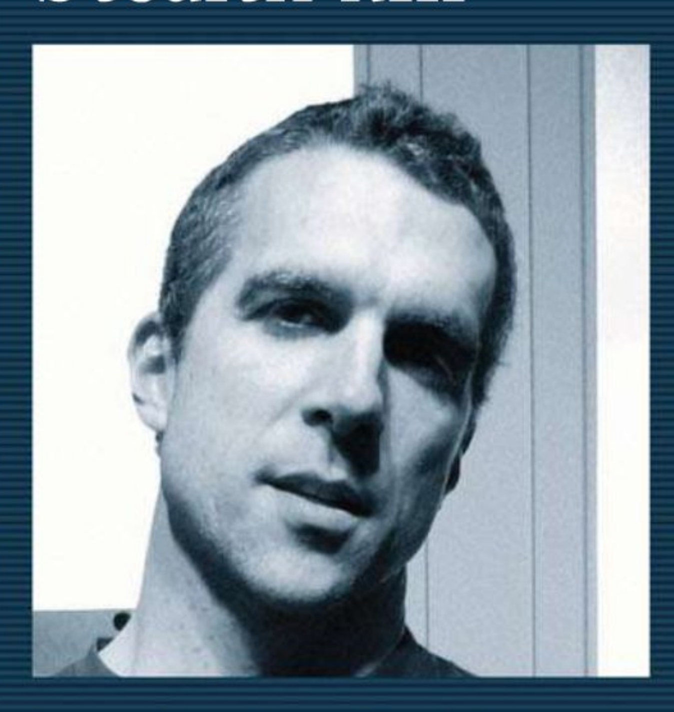
In 2007, linguist Steven Pinker gave a speech presenting evidence from archaeologists that suggested something that seemed to clash with our modern perceptions of the ancient world. He argued that our nomadic ancestors were actually far more violent and murderous than we are today. Studies of modern-day hunter-gatherers (who live much the same as our ancestors did in the time before civilisation) show

"The primary attraction of violence in the media lies not in the explicit violence itself, but in what the violence represents"



Sci-fi games like *Gears Of War* often get away with far more violence because it's removed enough from everyday experience that it doesn't trigger real-life fears among players. Games that are more grounded in reality often attract more attention from censors

Stealth kill



Do players kill with reckless abandon? Does the style of game affect how often players are willing to kill an inanimate NPC? We talk with *Splinter Cell: Conviction* project lead **Patrick Redding** (above) about the issue of killing in the stealth genre.

Do you find that players are more reluctant to kill NPCs in a stealth game? Do they react more sympathetically when they're being asked to kill someone who doesn't have a chance to defend themselves?
Let's start with the player's perspective on the game as a whole. No matter what context we try to give the game through story or themes or metaphorical wrapping, the player still experiences the game through its systems, and the dynamics that unfold from their choices and inputs. What makes a stealth game 'stealthy' is that the player has the ability to use the environment as a force multiplier and as a tool for outmanoeuvring the enemies and for managing the state of the AI.

Now, are players more reluctant to kill an enemy because the detection model of the AI indicates that the enemy is unsuspecting? I doubt it. Because unless there is a feature of the game that allows the player to explore the consequences of killing an aware versus an unaware AI, we're essentially relying on the player's tendency to anthropomorphise bots to create that moment of ethical self-doubt. And I haven't seen much evidence to suggest that this is a powerful factor for most players.

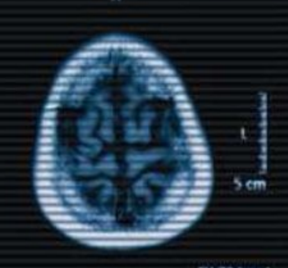
Do designers and storytellers of stealth games have to work harder to establish good reasons for NPCs to be killed? It seems that stealth lacks the simplicity of action game violence – ie, that guy is shooting at me, so I should kill him.
Here's what I think the actual problem is: stealth games have – unusually – afforded players a very high degree of agency when compared to other types of action games. The classic stealth games like *Thief* and *Splinter Cell* cultivated a slower, more methodical style of play and invited players to parse the level design ingredients around them, to discover the wide range of available tactical choices. When a game does that, it's creating an expectation in the mind of the player – that they have choices, that there are multiple ways of dealing with a challenge.

As a designer, if you're going to create that expectation, you have to deliver. If you've spent the whole game telling the player, 'You have a choice', it will feel weird if the game suddenly insists that they don't have that choice. Several incarnations of *Splinter Cell* have actively explored that tension. In the narrative, Sam is told, this is your mission, you need to take this person out or you have to do something terrible to keep your cover intact. And sometimes the player can try to circumvent those orders and has to live with the consequences.

I don't think players are nearly as haunted by the deaths of NPCs as they are by the thought that a game might support alternate approaches that they haven't yet explored. The real question isn't 'Why should you kill NPCs in a stealth game?' It's 'Why can't I have more mechanical choice in any other games?'





that the likelihood that a male would die at the hands of another male can range anywhere from 15 per cent to as high as 60 per cent in some parts of the world. By comparison, during the 20th century in the developed world that chance was around only one per cent, and that includes the deaths in both world wars.

What this tells us is that our ancestors likely lived in an extremely violent world full of murder and warfare. Children who grew up with a desire to practise combat and mentally prepare for inevitable violent encounters would have been gifted with a huge survival advantage. What's interesting about this is how specific this explanation is to the violent media phenomenon. It explains with elegant simplicity why the average person abhors violence in the real world, and yet constantly indulges in the fake version. It even explains why this effect is concentrated during adolescence.

Many people point out that humans should naturally hate violence. There is an obvious evolutionary advantage to being disgusted by wounds and blood. However, this theory also offers an explanation for why our minds distinguish between varieties of violence.

The deeper a person looks for explanations, the more plausible reasons are found that enable us to enjoy violence. "One possibility is that it might relate to in-group or out-group mechanisms in humans," says Dr **Robin Dunbar**, a psychology professor at the University of Oxford. "We are very prone to that, and seeing the out-group being punished or killed might help bond the community."

Still others have commented that the reason violence may have become so enjoyable is due to the artistic liberties in the media. Modern violent content is enjoyable in part because filmmakers and game designers have systematically stripped it of all that makes it unpleasant, leaving only the highly appealing narrative of struggling against adversity.

"I think the primary attraction of violence in the media lies not in the explicit violence itself, but in what the violence represents," says Weaver. "Rarely in my research do people enjoy watching violence just for the sake of violence, but people do enjoy conflict, suspense and action, all things that tend to be easily captured in violent scenes. In the case of games, there's some evidence that much of the violence, in *Super Mario Bros* for example, isn't really even perceived as a violent act. It's just a task, something that has to be accomplished."

When we add all of these considerations we end up with a very complete picture to explain why killing is so ubiquitous in videogaming. Depending on how you look at it, the answer is either disappointingly simple or excitingly profound: it couldn't have been any other way.

Humans carry a basic instinct that pressures them to seek out and learn from violent material. Videogames are nearly perfect for that drive. They use risk and reward, and audiovisual feedback, to further encourage the mind to continue down the path of learning about violence. Not only is the player satisfying a psychological craving to learn about violence, but he or she is also being rewarded by the gameplay systems for doing so.

Everything fits together perfectly to bring us to this point. Not only are videogames perfectly built to deliver us the spectacle of the kill, but we are perfectly engineered to enjoy it.

Killer IP #5

Soldier Of Fortune II

Developer: **Raven Software** Year: **2000**



The GHOUL hit detection and dismemberment system, blended with the Quake II engine, made *SOFII*'s violence just a little bit too real for some. The game was actually critically praised, but its accolades were overshadowed by the ingenuity of its violence.

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Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Bulletstorm



Just as well People Can Fly anticipated every combination of gun, boot, bad guy and painful surface – our sadistic imaginations haven't yet been let down once.
360, PC, PS3, EA

Serious Sam HD



No one does big-scale monster slaying quite like Sam. Always outnumbered, sometimes outgunned, Croteam's shooter is B-grade in all the best ways.
360, PC, MAJESCO

Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood



Skills honed by a catalogue of online assassinations (and a civilian death toll too high to count), we return to the mean streets of singleplayer. Bring it, Templars.
360, PC, PS3, UBISOFT

View to a kill
The opposing force is dying to please you



Crysis 2's extraterrestrial meanies make more entertaining enemies than those of the first game, but they are also less explicitly alien. Is a more humanoid form the key to a pleasing kill?

Gamers often talk of 'satisfying' combat – a qualifier that finds its substance in a weighty shotgun blast or the fine tuning of a weapon's effective range. But there is a still more gruesome aspect to it, written in the kick of a body, a spray of gore or an abrupt scream. In a genre built from such simple elements – the player, a gun and an enemy – the choice of who you shoot, how they die and what that makes you feel is anything but simple, a source of hot competition between devs looking for any advantage over the competition.

The game industry wields a macabre expertise in creating opponents whose death offers a perverse thrill. But what are the qualities of a good enemy? Is it purely a matter of intelligence? The variety of tactics at their disposal? Is it the ability for the player to empathise with, anthropomorphise, or interpret their behaviour?

Player feedback is essential in such power fantasies, where we wish to feel challenged and under threat, but capable of predicting and outwitting an enemy. Witness the many enemies that vocalise their every move, or whose behaviours are made more appreciably human. And, as we discover in our feature on p80, there are other deep-rooted psychological reasons for why we are intrigued by battle; to the degree that all sport and gaming is a form of martial training, human opponents will often inspire a greater (and sometimes unsettling) degree of bloodlust in the player.

This is emphasised by our gut reaction to *Crysis 2*'s alien nemeses. They're more comprehensible than those in *Crysis* by dint of a more accessibly humanoid morphology – but if the behaviour of the first game's space-squid was difficult to rationalise, and created tactically reductive battles, they were still fearsome and otherworldly.

Crysis 2's cybernetic battle-suited critters fall between the stools: too impassive and inscrutable to stir the spirit in battle, and yet not alien enough to be terrifyingly *other*. Though fighting them, equipped with a toolset of abilities that provides its own thrilling interest, is exciting in many other respects, you can't look at *Crysis 2*'s shiny tendrilled foes and not feel a perturbing desire to sunder soft human flesh instead.



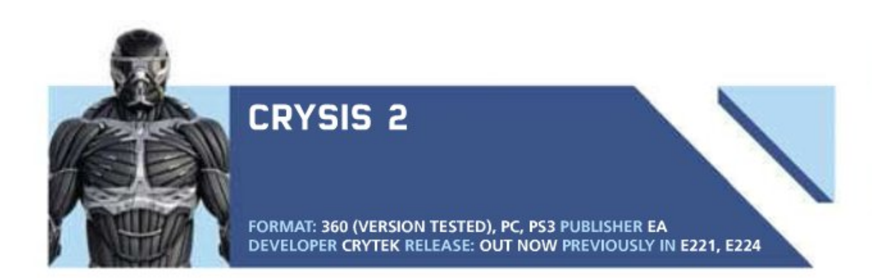








Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



CRYSIS 2

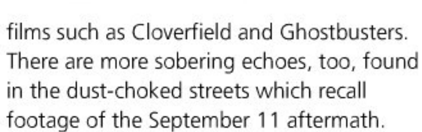
FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3 PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER CRYTEK RELEASE: OUT NOW PREVIOUSLY IN E221, E224

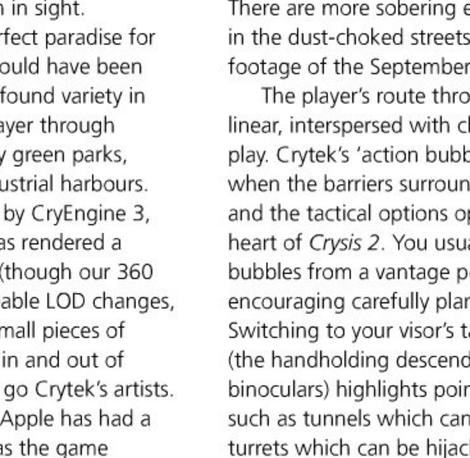






While there is an aim assist, console players may find multiplayer demands a keener aim than many other shooters. Those used to the generous 'snap to' aim of *COD* will have to relearn the basics





For many, *Crysis 2* is a game defined by what's been stripped away. Partisan PC owners may mourn the passing of its graphics-card-squeezing exclusivity, but more fundamental changes have occurred. It's no longer open-ended, the Nanosuit 2.0 is a streamlined version of its predecessor, and – for Crytek, the biggest departure of all – there isn't a sun-dappled tropical beach in sight.

Swapping a picture-perfect paradise for New York's urban sprawl could have been disastrous, but Crytek has found variety in the setting, guiding the player through blue-grey skyscrapers, leafy green parks, rooftops at sunset and industrial harbours. It's helped in no small part by CryEngine 3, which, even on console, has rendered a painstakingly detailed city (though our 360 code was subject to noticeable LOD changes, as cans, boxes and other small pieces of urban detritus would fade in and out of view), but credit must also go Crytek's artists. More importantly, this Big Apple has had a hefty bite taken out of it: as the game continues, it increasingly resembles the New York under paranormal siege seen in films such as Cloverfield and Ghostbusters. There are more sobering echoes, too, found in the dust-choked streets which recall footage of the September 11 aftermath.

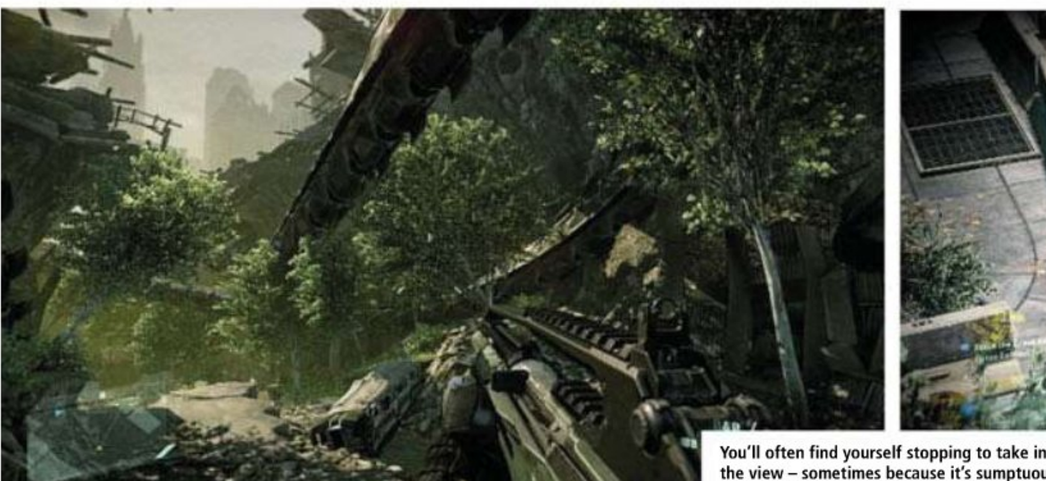
The player's route through this city is linear, interspersed with chunks of freeform play. Crytek's 'action bubbles', the moments when the barriers surrounding you fall away and the tactical options open up, are the heart of *Crysis 2*. You usually enter the bubbles from a vantage point high above, encouraging carefully planned assaults. Switching to your visor's tactical mode (the handholding descendant of *Far Cry*'s binoculars) highlights points of interest – such as tunnels which can be snuck through, turrets which can be hijacked, and structures which can be climbed – but you decide for yourself whether to heed this advice.



Silently killing foes, taking them out from their own snipers' nests, or charging in for a full-frontal assault: all are equally valid avenues of attack

It's a compromise between open-ended and linear play, but an effective one – you'll never be planning more than two minutes ahead in *Crysis 2*, but those minutes are pregnant with possibility. Skulking around the edges of an arena while silently killing foes, taking them out unexpectedly from their own snipers' nests, or charging in for a full-frontal explosive assault: all are equally valid avenues of attack, made possible through both the design of the levels and the power of the Nanosuit.

Few games so happily and excessively empower you as *Crysis 2*. Cloak mode alone allows you to run rings around your extraterrestrial and PMC opponents. Using the cloak to bypass whole sections of combat is a distinct possibility – and a disappointing one, exposing the absence of meaningful objectives to punctuate your journeys between points A and B. Armour mode, meanwhile, offers limited control of your defences: combine its protective ability with some high-end weaponry and you can tear





You'll often find yourself stopping to take in the view – sometimes because it's sumptuously detailed (left), and at others to eavesdrop on enemy troops and plan your attack (right)



Grabbing enemies and throwing them off the top of a skyscraper is always a pleasure. You can grab and lob almost anything, though it's an awkward way to go about combat





These four shots are from the PC version. As good looking as the console versions are, they each have minor limitations when compared to the PC build. The most noticable difference is in framerate, which the consoles cover with heavy motion blurring



Crytek fits in most of NY's tourist hotspots at some point – though in the case of Lady Liberty it's by snapping her head off

through whole platoons in moments. The rest of the first game's suit abilities – such as Strength and Speed – have been rolled into the default Power mode, an astute piece of streamlining which means that actions such as extended leaps or strength-enhanced kicks still require energy, but are always at your fingertips.

Against such a hi-tech one-man onslaught, Crytek's AI puts up an inconsistent fight. Perversely, it's at its best when you're outwitting it: cautious guards will sneak around corners to track down the source of a noise, aliens will split up to search open areas as you carry out cloaked hit-and-run attacks. In straight-up firefights, however, you'll rarely feel outmanoeuvred, just outgunned. It's not that enemies don't know how to split up, flank and use cover, it's just that your wide range of abilities keeps you one step ahead. Less forgivable are the behavioural glitches – enemies who are seemingly unaware of your (uncloaked) presence, for instance, or who hopelessly and endlessly try to walk through walls.

Multiplayer forces you to relearn the potential of the suit. Cloak is less all-powerful here – human players will spot the giveaway refractive effect while the AI can't – forcing you to use it more cautiously. Nonetheless, the results of turning every player into a superhuman are evident; on the downside, it encourages an individualism which makes playing team-based games with unacquainted allies frustrating, but it does at least mean that there are always multiple tactical options at your disposal. Those who pride themselves on sharp aim and sharper reflexes will be pleased to find that Armour mode is no match for a couple of swift headshots – yet knowing when to use it is still an essential component of coming out the better from a firefight. One side effect of these extra tactical layers, however, is that newcomers can find themselves overwhelmed – a problem compounded by the now de rigeur levelling and upgrade system, taken to an extreme here: not only will new players have to slowly earn a decent range of guns and suit upgrades, they also have to earn the luxury of playing in anything other than the default free-for-all and deathmatch gametypes.

Multiplayer also benefits from the absence of the singleplayer's story. As a slice of techno-conspiracy nonsense it is, on paper, fine, but in practice it's poorly told, via loading-screen briefings and limply scripted, ponderous cutscenes. The scenes and set-pieces which Crytek wrings from this tale are often thrilling, but it's hard to escape the feeling that the studio is better at riffing on both classic and recent sci-fi tales than spinning one of its own. A stronger narrative might have eased the fatigue which kicks in towards the end of the game – by which point the absence of varied objectives begins to make these action bubbles feel rather samey.

So if you take away the free-roaming paradise, what's left? Against Crytek's own back catalogue, *Crysis 2* can't help but feel an uncomfortably constrained game, an open-ended shooter struggling to escape a linear straitjacket, but hold it up against the army of shooters which consider player freedom an unnecessary distraction from scripted thrills, and the liberty it offers the player is palpable. *Crysis 2* is game whose compromises are easy to detect – but not one brought down by them. **[8]**

Tailored suit



Crysis 2's freeform approach can be found in singleplayer's upgrade system, too. You can purchase a relatively modest selection of improvements relating to four aspects of suit performance in any order and switch between them at any time. But it's the combinations that count: air stomp and armour enhance will let you drop on a pack of enemies from above and give you the defences to survive the counter-attack. A proximity alarm and the ability to enter and exit Cloak more quickly, by contrast, will better equip you to sneak around behind enemy lines.





SHIFT 2: UNLEASHED

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 (VERSION TESTED)
DEVELOPER SLIGHTLY MAD STUDIOS PUBLISHER EA
RELEASE: OUT NOW PREVIOUSLY IN E223, E225





The Gumpert Apollo, the Koenigsegg CCX, the McLaren F1, the Lamborghini Gallardo: *Shift 2* hits all the right notes with its supercar lineup while keeping the low-end drives to a minimum, avoiding a *GT*-style 'encyclopaedia'

Jostling and spinning at almost every turn, the marketing for *Shift 2: Unleashed* has been a nauseating fight for position. Obsessed with *Gran Turismo 5* and *Forza Motorsport III*, promising their ruin one minute and their 'opposite' the next, it needs you to think that Bizarre Creations never existed, that Codemasters hasn't made a game since *BMX Simulator* and that beyond *Need For Speeds World* and *Hot Pursuit* there is nothing but 'sterile' sims just asking for a bloody nose. In other words, it needs you to think this game is important.

Much of this has involved amping up the message that *Shift* portrays the 'driver's battle' – the violence and fear of being locked inside the chassis – and by extension its new default view mode, the helmet-cam. Bringing a touch of *Battlefield* to race day, this technically brilliant POV takes the nervous cockpit camera from the first game (which does return in the sequel) and adds a whole new layer of sensation.

So, as you shift weight to enter a massive drift, you'll slide to the point of wondering if the doors are firmly locked. Brake into a corner and you pitch towards the dashboard. Look-to-apex, a feature familiar to *GTR2* players, lets the camera be your eyes as it peers into oncoming turns. Speed up and your focus narrows, blurring the instruments and mirrors. Faster, and the jittering begins. Crash, and you're hit with a black-and-white cocktail of fullscreen concussion effects.

It's engrossing stuff which invites – and needs – second and third chances to prove itself. In night races especially, where car-shaped shadows dance across the ground, the glow of the dashboard and its reflection in the glass achieve a small breakthrough in natural realism.

It won't be for everyone. With our loyalty wavering during later races, we found ourselves wanting options for what is, in



As you enter a massive drift, you'll slide to the point of wondering if the doors are locked. Brake into a corner and you pitch towards the dashboard

visual feedback terms, a feature made of features. We wanted a little less shellshock after just minor crashes, a quicker recovery for the big ones, and the complete removal of the *Call Of Duty*-style dirt decals that flash regularly across the windscreen. Some might even demand sliders. But no, it's everything or nothing. Slightly Mad has probably tweaked the view so much that it wants its values staying put – though try telling that to PC owners.

With the helmet-cam turned off, you realise how much of the 'driver's battle' is really just a euphemism for 'race day atmosphere', the three-year-old mantra of *Race Driver: Grid*. These kinds of comparisons might terrify EA – maybe *Grid*'s too arty, too niche, too *precarious* – but they flatter this game more than its gladiatorial frontend or loading-screen words of 'wisdom'.

Tracks in *Shift 2*, for example, can feel more alive than in Codemasters' game (though might soon be alive with product placement thanks to crowds of billboards). Many are fictitious and thus free-to-explore



The drivers who guide you through each discipline put their decal-emblazoned car on the line at the end of each tier









Amusing professional drift racer Vaughn Gittin Jr (above left) and his peers pop up throughout in expensive-looking cutscenes, making *Shift 2* look like MTV Cribs crossed with a driving theory test. We didn't dislike this feature as much as we feared we would, but your mileage may well vary. Night driving (above right) is new to the series



Despite running at 30fps, the new rendering engine delivers visuals to rival the genre's absolute best. When it's not making the daytime races blush and blanch, the dynamic light and shadow makes the nights come alive

The new career structure lets you skip the odd event if you don't like the discipline, though the early emphasis on quick two-lap races should annoy the same folks it did last time

scenery rich with landmarks, elevations and atmospheric phenomena. Others, like Bathurst, add their own exoticism to the real-world roster. Across 40 events, the career does its job of mixing up venues and disciplines (GT1, GT3, retro, muscle, modern, drift, endurance), and only occasionally dropping a stinker like…

The Eliminator: your likely first dose of the game's cowboy AI. You'd think it would have been fixed and it kind of has – it's not so much like the dodgems any more, the whole Precision/Aggressive system binned with prejudice – but sometimes the AI just acts a little 'human', braking at strange points during corners, caring little for processional ethics and getting a little too friendly during turns one and two. Then you realise it's the other turns as well, where occasionally AI drivers get a *lot* too friendly, serving you up that concussion cocktail from earlier. The Eliminator, an often disastrous event, is the epicentre.

It's a shame because the handling, another bugbear last time, has been largely repaired. Some of the heavier assists are awful, leaving you unable to impose your will on the race or your personality on the car, but strip them back to Pro or Elite levels and, especially via a wheel, you'll realise why the Pagani Huayra's game debut is causing such a stir. The game asks you to power through corners and you can do it now without oversteer, only drifting when you mean it. Upgrades, meanwhile, culminating in extreme 'works' upgrades, actually make a difference, uncorking each vehicle's tuning options.

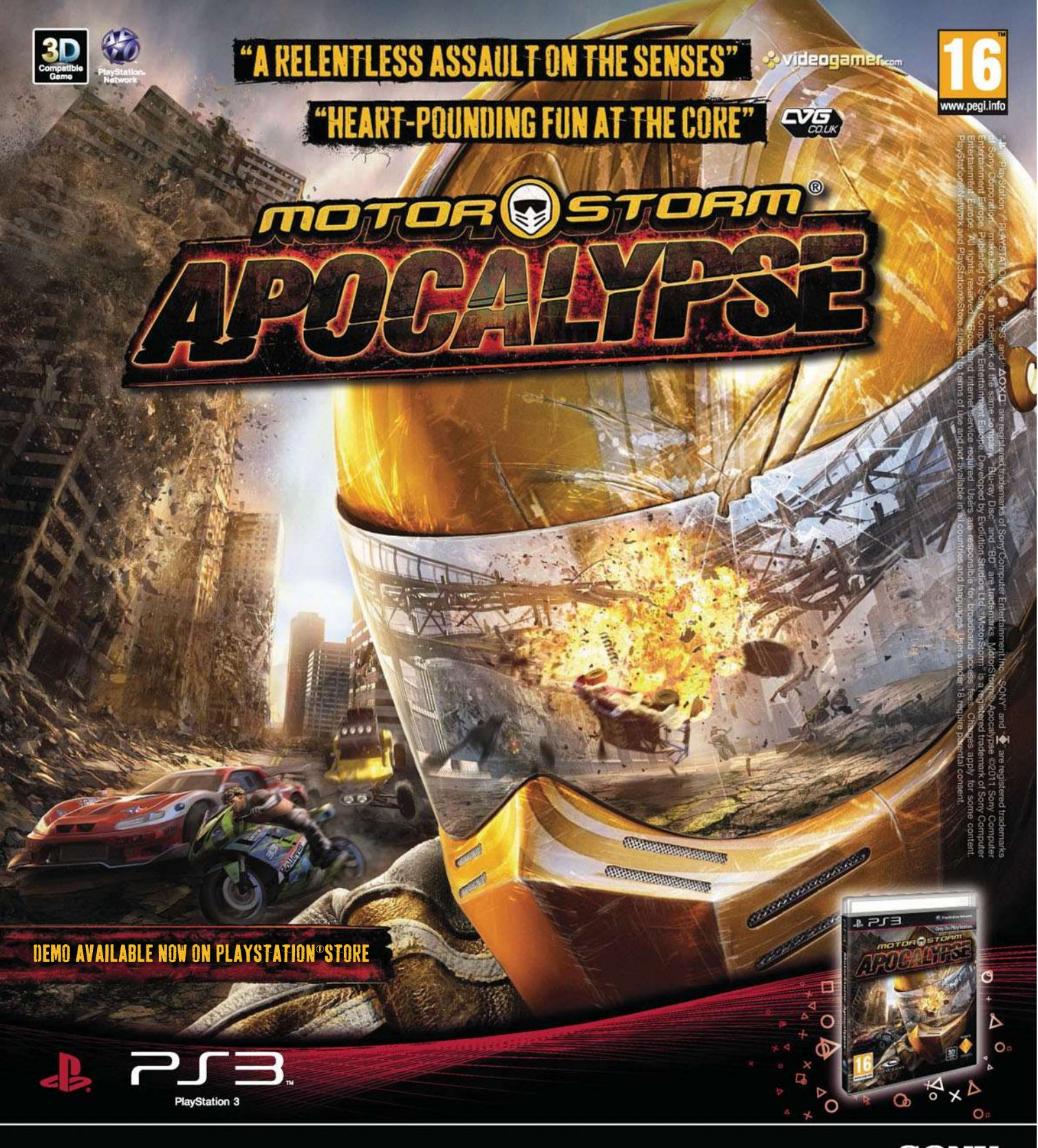
For those worried about the 'EA-ness' of *Shift 2*, the good and bad news is that nothing's much of a surprise. For all that Autolog does to help you build a personal brand, EA's is always bigger. Whether it's the constant attempts to sell you the complete car and track selection for real money, those aforementioned Trojan billboards, or the imprisonment of Photo Mode shots on the Autolog server, you can sometimes feel more like a shopper than a player.

If there is a surprise, it's a refined experience system that continues its good work without need for all the trinkets and fireworks of last time. Sticking to numbers which Autolog can digest and giving you constant objectives at multiple scales, from victory conditions to mastery of every corner, it gives real value to a long-term career. It's a reminder that 'accessible' – along with 'Project', 'Gotham', 'Grid' and 'arcade' – isn't such a dirty word after all. **[8]**

For the record



You can take the Autolog out of *Hot Pursuit* but you can't quite take the *Hot Pursuit* out of Autolog. One of the more surprising effects of weaving EA's match- and rivalry-making software into *Shift 2* is how it polices much of the singleplayer experience, only uploading 'clean' laps to the ubiquitous SpeedWall. As a multiplayer enabler it's fantastic, of course, providing a seamless social networking wrapper for the entire game, happily making its own recommendations if your friends let you down. It deserves a better UI, though, the narrow lettering managing to crush the entire game's frontend into a 4:3 space and still leaving much of it empty.



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Yellow circles on the map indicate light cover, green means heavy. Both are moot if one side decides to send a monstrous unit crashing into the region. Units like the Eldar Wraithlord and Imperial Guard tanks (left) smash straight through walls, rocks and other items of cover





WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR II – RETRIBUTION

FORMAT: PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: THQ **DEVELOPER:** RELIC ENTERTAINMENT

After 25 years of fiction and tabletop carnage, any company that aimed to produce fully fledged campaigns for all of Warhammer 40,000's disparate races would surely need to sell their soul to the Chaos gods. In the previous two *Dawn Of War II* releases, Relic dodged the challenge entirely, handing the singleplayer to Space Marine chapter the Blood Ravens and leaving a handful of the universe's aliens as playable multiplayer choices.

Retribution widens the gene pool. The Blood Ravens – corrupted by the taint of Chaos and acting as antagonist to the player's chosen faction – are joined by Zerg inspirations the Tyranids, Imperial Guard, Orks, Eldar and Chaos themselves. Each race is slotted into an easily navigated story template: Blood Raven chapter leader Kyras has fallen to Chaos, and is flitting between planets, threatening to transmogrify into a four-storey daemon. For each of the playable races, for their own specific reasons, that's a bad thing.

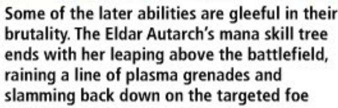
There's little deviance in the way the stories play out, but *Retribution*'s success is in the way the races behave. Broadly, each faction corresponds to its tabletop incarnation. The Eldar – fighting to recover their ancestors' lost souls and punish Chaos – are physically flimsy but lethal when their long- and short-range units are deployed in supporting positions. The Orks – fighting because their leader wants a new hat – are a green tide of muscle and blood, best hurled at a bulwark until it crumbles.

Campaign missions are as chaotic or as pared-down as the player wishes. Capturing points and smashing crates increases the quantity of Requisition and Power (both are required to fuel buffs and call reinforcements) as well as increasing the population cap. These three elements can be combined in myriad ways. Traditional strategisers can recruit squads on the battlefield and artfully arrange them in cover before beckoning the enemy. They could be cheap cannon fodder – like the Imperial Guard's gaggle of grunts – or, as with the Space Marine Dreadnought, single, hulking sarcophagi of great warriors, blessed with the most ludicrous weaponry.

Or you can strip back, take only four units, and carve up your opponent with liberal use of special abilities. Even these tally with the races' playstyles. The Orks are an uproarious highlight, their infiltration specialist eventually learning how to turn invisible, sashay up to a foe and then explode, all without serious injury to himself. Play the game through on normal, and each skill deployed is a brutal little thrill; try it on hard and *Retribution* demands clever overlap, advanced tactics and quick fingers. The latter is also true of the excellent Last Stand mode, in which three heroes combine to hold off waves of encroaching troops.

In the campaign mode, you're rarely tied to one methodology. Before each mission comes the choice of away team. Stow a hero and they're replaced by elite squads, like the ones players requisition on the field but bolstered with extra goodies. It's telling that the Tyranids – lumbered without defined heroes in 40K's fiction and only having squads to deploy in *Retribution* – feel like the most neutered race: single soldiers with hyper-powered abilities are easier to keep track of, and more fun to play as, than bundles of easily killed no-names.

The choice to bring six armies to the pretend tabletop leaves *Retribution* short on one playthrough, but overflowing with things to do in comparison with its predecessors. Each race has a combat formula with a shelf life, and as soon as you've pinned the equation down, the enjoyment you derive from each deployment diminishes. But that just means it's time to start another fight. **[8]**



Some of the later abilities are gleeful in their brutality. The Eldar Autarch's mana skill tree ends with her leaping above the battlefield, raining a line of plasma grenades and slamming back down on the targeted foe



Some of the new Imperial Guard heroes work best in a crowd. The Commissar can select one of his own men to execute for cowardice, boosting the other soldiers

Gear of war



Players get a choice of reward on finishing a mission, usually in one of two flavours. The first is a simple unlock, giving access to a squad or vehicle for later use on the field. The second is wargear. Electing to pick a nice new rifle as a mission prize – or finding one on the battlefield – can tease you into varying your playstyle. Skills, too, come via unlocks, players choosing to plug points into one of three trees, broadly defined as health, damage or mana. Each hero has an archetype they fit best, but some experimentation results in advantageous discoveries – tuning one of two melee specialists to spit out healing to cover the other, for example.





Bowling can lead to gratifying destruction as you wipe out waves of charging enemies and traverse the track with the help of ramps, boosts and moments of blind faith

There are four worlds to conquer – one for each franchise, followed by a final showdown set adrift in space – but each becomes tiresome after a single visit





PLAYSTATION MOVE HEROES

FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCE **DEVELOPER:** NIHILISTIC GAMES

Move Heroes' ensemble of iconic Sony characters sounds like a marketing man's dream, but it's trapped inside a fan's nightmare – if something so bland could really be called nightmarish. Thrown together for an intergalactic sporting event, the stars of *Jak And Daxter*, *Ratchet & Clank* and *Sly Racoon* have orders to brawl, bowl, shoot and disc-throw their way to victory.

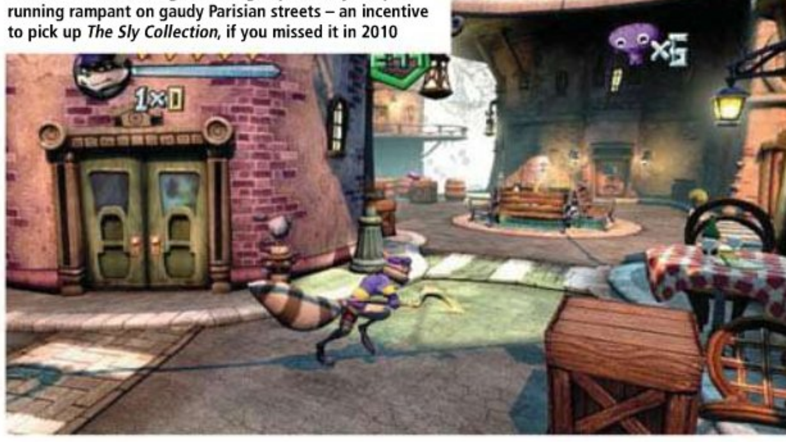
It may feature Sony's poster children, but the game doesn't fly the flag well for the company's recently released motion-sensing hardware. Disc-throwing, in which you liberate caged aliens by smashing them free with a guided, razor-sharp Frisbee, is precise and responsive but spoiled by claustrophobic level design. Bowling is equally frustrating due to convoluted alley layouts that reward luck rather than strategy. The hack-and-slash scenarios are the worst of the bunch, monotonous wrist-flicking affairs bogged down by poor collision detection, and a wily camera in bed with disorienting auto-aim.

The surprise is that Nihilistic almost finds a good groove with the shooting scenarios. These short, sharp bursts of frantic fun, as waves of robotic and (literally) pig-headed foes flood the screen, have the unlikely air of *Serious Sam* at its chaotic best. It's a fleeting reminder that motion control can work wonders with a simple and clear focus.

A basic error in the game's design is that the tasks don't require – or incorporate – many of the cast's trademark abilities and animations (with the exception of a few special moves), denying proceedings a much-needed sense of character and charm. There are collectible incentives to return to the game once completed, but no welcoming personality. The substandard cutscenes are further reminders that Nihilistic is a thirdparty developer without a firm grasp of what makes these characters unique. Its own additions – hosts Gleeber and Lunk – are the uninspired blobs their names suggest. This lack of verve is, however, confounded by the quality of the visuals, which are on the whole bright, bold and beautifully modelled. Sly Cooper's gaudy Paris is a delightful, sleepy old town that teases what a current-gen entry in the series might look.

The lack of depth and ease of completion, along with the simplistic approach to character, suggests *Move Heroes* is targeting pre-teens (with bulging wallets hidden in their schoolbags, and advanced hand-eye coordination), but it's hard to imagine the novelty of the cast lasting long. As such, there's little else to recommend the experience. In trying to tread a tightrope between action game and minigame collection, *Move Heroes* ultimately fails at both, delivering a cycle of challenges that never transcend routine. If this is what new technology does to old heroes, perhaps they're best left in the past. **[3]**

Move Heroes at least gives us a glimpse of Sly Cooper running rampant on gaudy Parisian streets – an incentive to pick up *The Sly Collection*, if you missed it in 2010





Move Heroes may have been forgiven its shallowness if it wasn't for the lack of variety – each of the four worlds requires the same, mundane four challenges, such as base-defending (above), to be performed repeatedly to progress

Whoever wins, we lose



Move Heroes **is an ideal premise for a party game, but it only features multiplayer in the form of tacked-on co-op modes. One player heals and defends while the other performs the game's main tasks. To perform screen-wiping specials, they must clang Move controllers together like pint glasses in one of its few innovations. The lack of pass-the-controller or tournament modes feels lacking, considering the presence of bowling, reaffirming the sense that Nihilistic isn't willing to commit to any one genre or even way of playing.**


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You can choose either to tweak the weapons and armour of your Patapon warriors or, conveniently, automatically optimise their loadouts with a button



The story is throwaway, and far less intrusive than in the previous game. It's a quirky, silly tale that meshes well with the bold art design. Back at base (below), you're free to tinker with the skills and equipment of your warriors. It's a delightful, nuanced little hub that is also your gateway to multiplayer



PATAPON 3

FORMAT: PSP **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCE **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE

Historically, the genres of realtime strategy and rhythm action haven't proved perfect bedfellows for other gameplay styles. Remember *Odama*? How about *Donkey Konga*? It's to Sony Japan's credit, then, that these two polarised strands of gaming have been fused together into a functional, at times enchanting whole in the *Patapon* series. It's a mix that could easily be volatile – where the RTS is about pausing for thought, rhythm action is about relentless movement – yet *Patapon* manages to combine both the resource management of a strategy title and the addictive nature of thumb-tapping tunes.

Though *Patapon 2* was little more than a retread of old ground, the third game pushes the concept a little further with a set of stats, items and levelling trees that wouldn't look out of place in a roleplaying game. Levelling up weapons and preparing for quests is now as crucial to victory as the tirelessly catchy chanting. As before, your team's tactics are determined by your ability to match button presses with an ongoing beat. Your band of marching brothers attacks, defends, jumps, dodges and charges up depending on your inputs, engagements playing out like musical tugs of war.

It's the same central mechanic as before, of course, and the lack of meaningful innovation in singleplayer belies a sense that the concept may be wearing thin, forcing the developer to innovate elsewhere. The multiplayer component is therefore much more fully fleshed than it was on its debut in *Patapon 2*. Battling through the campaign quests with a group of customised friends is welcome relief from the struggle of the more difficult challenges (see 'Pon de replay'). The problem is that you're all marching to your own beat rather than in unison, denying the proceedings a sense of unity and resulting in uncoordinated attacks. Though text shortcuts are available via the D-pad, they're ultimately an inconvenience that interferes with the stern concentration required to forge ahead. *Patapon* may be many things, but a cooperative experience, it seems, is not one of them.

Of more threat to *Patapon* than the many beasts that roam its lands is the prevalence of social and mobile gaming that has slowly spread alongside this series' iterations. Though still unique, *Patapon*'s crisp, minimalist art design and central mechanic is no longer a strong enough draw to excuse its repetitiveness and price tag. It's still catchy, then, but it's also time *Patapon* changed its tune and delivered some richer sounds. **[6]**





There's a much more rock'n'roll sound to *Patapon 3*, not least because electric guitar riffs now back many of the tracks. Visually the game has loosened up a bit, too, with more nuanced scenery and denser levels

Pon de replay



Failing quests in *Patapon 3* – something you'll do regularly – is made tolerable by the experience points you'll retain afterwards. It transforms frustration into relief as you level up your crew of rhythm-loving warriors, priming them for success next time around. The option to replay previous missions, too, is a means of scavenging better weapons and items you may have missed first time around. As with *Patapon 2*, there are some big, progress-blocking moments early on in the main quest, so the option to scurry off to a more relaxed level of your choice is welcome.



Squad members build up a power meter with every kill, eventually allowing a power move – dealing vastly more damage or allowing a second movement or action phase

TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON SHADOW WARS

FORMAT: 3DS RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: UBISOFT SOFIA PREVIOUSLY IN: E225

Executive orders



You don't come to a Clancy game, let alone a turn-based tactical game, expecting rich, mellifluous prose, but *Shadow Wars*' narrative really does try your patience. Its abysmally animated cutscenes feature caricatured faces which, supposedly in conversation with each other, smile or frown out of the screen while slowly sliding left and right. It's an odd presentational decision. The characters, never a strong point for Clancy, seem to have undergone a further level of charisma-blanching, producing a cringing line of sassy assassins and street-talking chaingunners. Annoyingly, you often have to click through dialogue screens while on a mission as your squad discusses what you've already read in the briefing.

Pity tactical shooter fans – clearly they're not numerous enough to prop up a mega-franchise. The home console Clancy games have shed strategy for well-staged scripts, while the tactical warfighters among us are asked to get their fix from this top-down, turn-based game. But this is more than a sop: Ubisoft has brought on board Julian Gollop, the fêted designer of turn-based masterpieces *UFO: Enemy Unknown* and *Laser Squad Nemesis*.

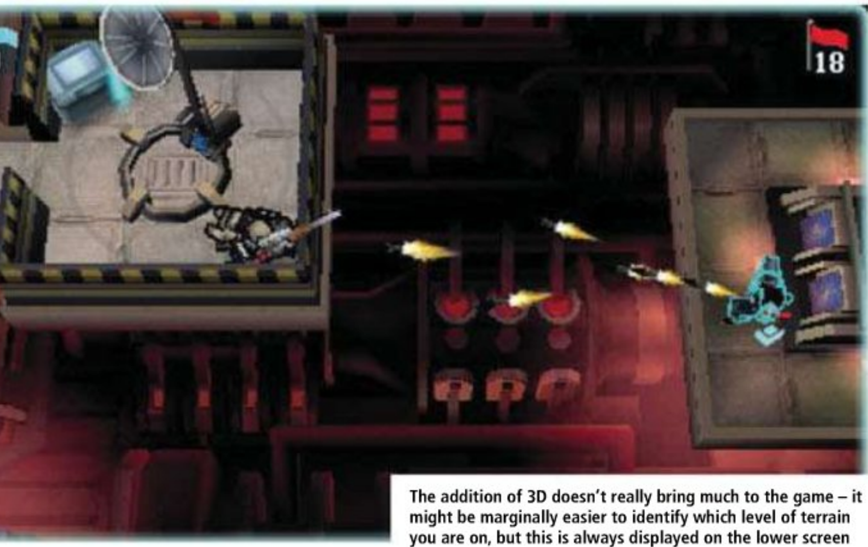
If he risks being accused of remaking the same game for a quarter of a decade, then it is at least a very good one, albeit lacking some of the innovations brought by its successors. Nonetheless, the principles of the model's dogma recommend it strongly, building and upgrading a squad of different interlocking abilities, articulating your units in such a way as to wring out the maximum advantage from each turn. Here, given the narrative gloss of the Clancyverse, each member becomes a character – and their powers are more diverse and colourfully accentuated than in the game's competitors, albeit appended with depressing caricatures, dredged from the Venn diagram confluence of videogame and war movie cliché.

The game does a tremendous job of relaying information succinctly – at once showing you how far you can move, who you can hit, the power of your weaponry at various ranges, the damage you'll do to individual targets, your sightlines, potential return fire, the damage you can take, and the level of protection afforded you by the environment. It's a remarkable achievement, but one occasionally undermined by frustrating inconsistencies between intuition and rigid convention. Disable a turret with an EMP, or suppress an enemy with the chaingun, and the unit can still return fire straight away – even though it is crippled the next turn. Optical camouflage doesn't quite work as you might imagine: enemies can still see the unit, they just can't fire at it unless they've revealed it by standing in the adjacent square. Nor are the sightlines occluded by different levels of scenery in ways that are consistent with the visuals – you'll often see bullets clip through the edge of a cliff to hit those below.



A problem that rears its head in the early levels is the game's tendency to take you by surprise with scripting, removing control of squad members just as you intended to heal them, then throwing them right in harm's way

Though there's no strategic metagame of *UFO*'s world-saving grandeur, the variety of the missions bounce you between open spaces and underground bases, constantly foisting new challenges on the player. There are wave survival and capture-the-hill style sub-missions, in which you must seize command points to call in airstrikes and stop enemies reinforcing. None of which is a conclusive argument for a return to the genre's roots – particularly not for those with access to the ostensibly similar, extremely cheap games which popularised it – but this is an enthralling title on its own terms, and, given the bombastic direction of its Clancy-game brethren, probably the closest fans will get to true tactics for some time. **[7]**



The addition of 3D doesn't really bring much to the game – it might be marginally easier to identify which level of terrain you are on, but this is always displayed on the lower screen





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SUPER MONKEY BALL 3D

FORMAT: 3DS **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA **DEVELOPER:** DIMPS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E225

Super Monkey Kart



Monkey Racing manages to mimic *Mario Kart DS*'s surface details without capturing any of its spirit. Weapons copy Nintendo's showier items – 3D specs block a rival's view just like Blooper ink, and a giant monkey ball powers you forward like Bullet Bill – but ignore the smaller vindictive tools that give *Mario Kart* its strategic depth. Sega does know that everyone hates the blue shell, right? And the drift boost is all wrong: you hold a shoulder button to charge as you drift with an accelerate/brake combo. Sega should have farmed out this part of the game to Sumo – *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing* does a much better job of following in Mario's slipstream.

There's long been a hint of animal testing about *Super Monkey Ball*. Not just in the cruel and unusual concept – sealing squealing simians into plastic balls and forcing them to teeter over a bottomless abyss – but in Sega's willingness to subject its pets to the quirks of Nintendo's host platforms. Stylus, Remote, Balance Board: *Monkey Ball* obeys them all. 3DS, on the other hand, offers no tidy control solution. It is a collision of circle pad, buttons, gyroscopes and touchpad that asks Sega the dreaded question: what do *you* want *Monkey Ball* to be?

The answer, it seems, is a bit of everything. The game is controlled with either circle pad or gyroscopic tilt. Both work well within their respective limits, gyros comfortably tuned to the bend of the human wrist and the pad loosely easing in graceful arcs. However, the treatment of them as equals, their unique properties applied to the same set of levels, is a misstep. With an abundance of safety barriers and steep walls, the architects pander to the broader ability of tilt control, offering no challenge to those opting for the responsive circle pad.

Using the latter approach sees the 80 stages pass in record time – disappointing for a series that once asked us to skid across guitar strings mere pixels thick. Tilting adds a little edge – sharp turns become trickier and sudden stops hairier – but these stages still favour labyrinthine awkwardness over actual danger. Previous games struck a fine balance of specific physical feats and tense countdowns; *Super Monkey Ball 3D* relies too much on the latter. There are few opportunities to build up speed, and threat feels falsely injected by an overabundance of pinball bumpers.

Some levels tap into the old way of thinking, using momentum to skim monkeys around corners that would otherwise be impossible or screaming through a half pipe as you nervously eye the approaching rim. Speedier segments benefit from a 3D effect that stretches stages into the screen, giving a tangible sense of the ground zipping by underneath – it's a shame such velocity is rare. Elsewhere, the effect only highlights how flat and uninspiring the landscapes are. Towering structures in the final world prove that technical limitation isn't to blame, but an absence of imagination.

The minigames disappoint. *Monkey Ball* usually hides a gem among a selection of throwaway distractions – Monkey Target remains a GameCube highlight – though this outing cuts the count to two. Monkey Fight and Monkey Racing riff on *Smash Bros* and *Mario Kart* respectively. Though both boast a range of modes and unlockable treats, neither is executed well enough to keep you playing. Racing suffers from horrible rubber-band AI and a cumbersome drift mechanic (see 'Super Monkey Kart'), while fighting descends into the kind of brainless button-mashing of which *Smash Bros* is so often wrongly accused.

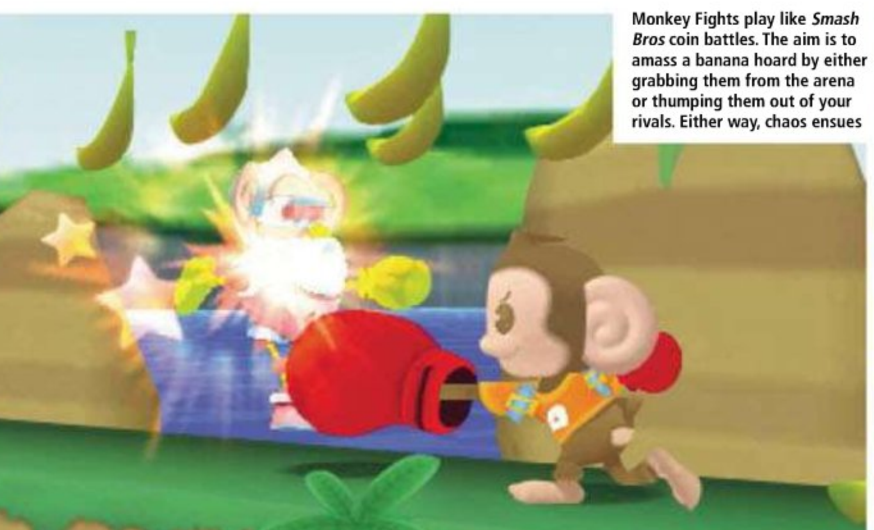
With its tight analogue circle pad and welcoming wireless play, 3DS was the perfect opportunity to take *Super Monkey Ball* back to its GameCube glory days. Instead we find a game that has spent so many years honouring various types of hardware, it has forgotten its own original aim. Sega should stop monkeying around with the series, and just roll with it. **[5]**



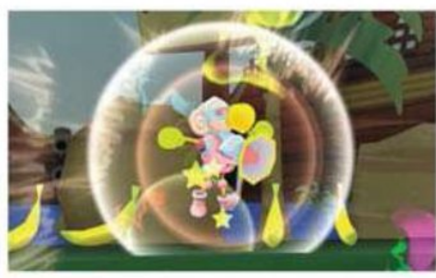
It doesn't help matters that stages are again divided into clumps of ten. If success relied on beating 30 in a row – as in the GC version – the palm sweats might return



For all its structural flaws, *Super Monkey Ball* remains a handsomely made game. Its levels are carved from bright, sharp colours and play out to suitably funky beats



Monkey Fights play like *Smash Bros* coin battles. The aim is to amass a banana hoard by either grabbing them from the arena or thumping them out of your rivals. Either way, chaos ensues





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RIDGE RACER 3D

FORMAT: 3DS **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO BANDAI
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E225

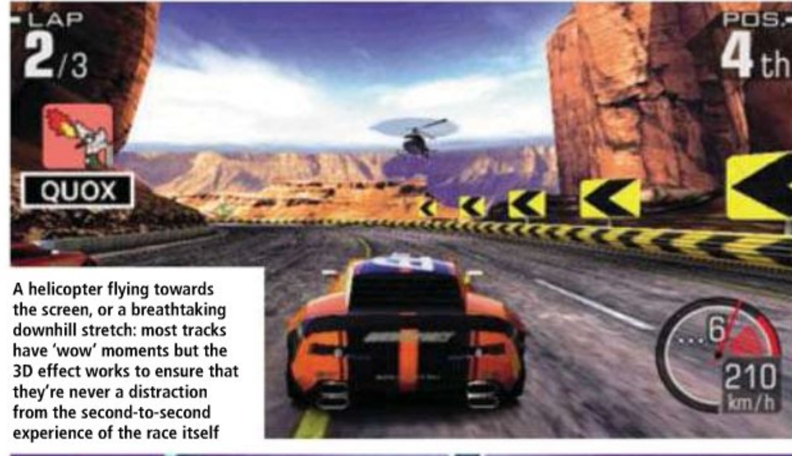
With almost every new hardware generation comes a fresh opportunity to hurl improbably fast, gaudy vehicles around neon cities to the accompaniment of hyperactive Japanese techno. Happily, *Ridge Racer* has found a very comfortable home on Nintendo's 3DS. Controlling those wild, careening drifts is a joy with the circle pad, which provides perfect resistance under the thumb. And it clearly shows as unsubstantiated any rumours of lessened difficulty.

Ridge Racer 3D is structured around three main grand prix events, with an abundance of race series in each – there's no shortage of content. The first few hours are temperate, but it hits its stride in the second grand prix, where guiding sleek, ostentatious sports cars almost weightlessly round corners at over 300kph begins to feel like some long-dormant instinct buried deep in the brain.

It will be a disappointment to series veterans that there are no new tracks, but there are so very many old ones that it barely matters, and they have been thoughtfully redesigned to maximise the impact of the 3D. Through the bumper cam, especially, the effect is stunning. Falling petals and victory confetti stick to the camera, and skyscrapers and snow-dusted mountains hang in the middle distance as the track stretches out towards them.

The revelation is that the 3D isn't just a neat trick – it improves the experience of racing. When corners – or, for the less skilled, walls – loom suddenly in the foreground, the effect noticeably sharpens your feel for the racing line. Rivals look close enough to touch as you nudge past them in their slipstream. It draws you into an instinctual meditative trance.

Ridge Racer is something we've seen before, but we've never seen it like this. *RR3D* is the most convincing handheld iteration of the series to date, and an encouraging illustration of how 3DS's flagship feature can be more than a pretty visual twist. **[8]**



A helicopter flying towards the screen, or a breathtaking downhill stretch: most tracks have 'wow' moments but the 3D effect works to ensure that they're never a distraction from the second-to-second experience of the race itself



Ridge Racer traditionally excels in competitive multiplayer – our review unit was locked out of human competition, but the elastic AI provided a satisfying balance of challenge, fairness and imaginary personal rivalry



ASPHALT 3D

FORMAT: 3DS **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: GAMELOFT/UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: GAMELOFT **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E225



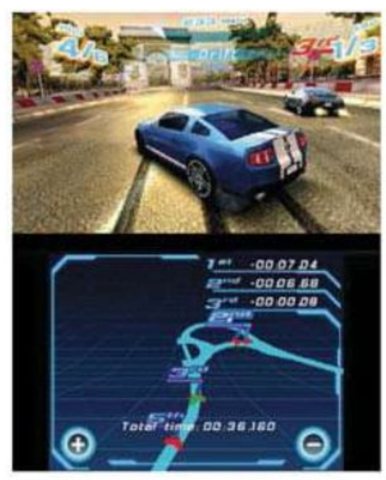
Races can be won or lost in their opening seconds. Just as a strong start can propel a lucky racer to the front of the pack, a bungled beginning can leave them trailing behind. What to make, then, of the opening of *Asphalt 3D*'s busier races, in which the game's engine, unable to cope with the sheer proximity of six vehicles at once, slowly creaks into life as the player chugs their way onto the course?

The framerate is at its worst at these moments and is only truly happy during the time trials. More populated races are jerky, and – embarrassingly – even the map screen struggles to keep up, updating in GPS-like increments while the clock attempts to keep time without stuttering.


The game throws up the odd unexpected sight. Collisions often look more like one car indelicately attempting to mount another than high-speed impacts of steel on steel

It's almost a relief that the game struggling to break free from these severe technical shortcomings is mundane. The cars might be from licensed marques, but this is no simulation: successful racing involves filling the nitrous bar via power-ups and drifting, and then boosting past the competition. Once you're one or two laps into a race, you'll be harried by police cars which must be dispatched *Hot Pursuit*-style with aggressive, high-speed barging. But collision detection is unpredictable at best – when you're driving at top speed, a police car which has the misfortune to tap your rear bumper is sent hurtling off the road.

The career mode offers a reasonable variety of challenges – straight-up races, time trials, one-on-one duels and takedown challenges. Outside of competition you can customise your vehicle, spending funds accrued through winning races and driving dangerously. No amount of tweaking, however, will coax an improved performance from the engine spluttering away beneath the bonnet. **[4]**


3D works well, helping you to judge distances and corners. However, the invasive HUD tends to flash messages into the foreground, making you refocus your eyes. It's a pity, too, that the already creaky framerate worsens when displaying in 3D





SAMURAI WARRIORS: CHRONICLES

FORMAT: 3DS **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: KOEI **DEVELOPER:** OMEGA FORCE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E225

The 3DS launch line-up – bereft as it is of any other hack-and-slash title – could be the perfect place for Koei to make some new converts to its brand of historical saga. Though stamped with the *Samurai Warriors* name, *Chronicles* manages to transcend its heritage, utilising the dual-screen interface in an economic and user-friendly way.

While the basic, repetitive combat is familiar, the ebb and flow of missions has been reinvigorated by the ability to change character with a tap of the stylus. Using icons displayed on the lower screen – which acts as your command centre – you jump between skirmishes and objectives, shortcutting the aimless wandering that has cursed many a campaign in previous iterations.

Missions consist largely of headhunting enemy generals and captains, offing them and reaping experience points, as well as gold to be spent in the army camp's shop. The camp – your hub between battles – is also where the game delivers its muddled story. Told through historical figures, it has all the overblown melodrama and romanticism you'd expect, and is ultimately gruff-voiced filler ushering you to the next showdown. Especially frustrating are the updates and often-useless chunks of dialogue that pop up in-game, hampering your view.


Fans of the series will find everything they expect. There's a huge number of missions, items and upgrades to plough through, and a broad cast of characters with distinct fighting styles

Though *Chronicles* succeeds in condensing and streamlining the ancient gameplay of the series, it stumbles trying to make worthwhile use of new hardware. The implementation of 3D does little to enhance the sense of scale, due in part to a camera which struggles to give you a good view of your contoured surroundings.

With its extravagant art direction, *Samurai Warriors* was the obvious franchise for Koei to debut on Nintendo's new platform. The surprise is how well the simple combat and new ideas work as a portable experience. **[6]**



The hardware stands up to waves of enemy soldiers, ninjas and armour-clad villains; slowdown is mostly unnoticeable, even with the most grandiose of attacks







SWARM

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: IGNITION ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: HOTHEAD GAMES





Swarmites can be stacked to reach DNA, turning the game into a perilous balancing act. Moving too fast will result in a frustrating, fiery collapse



Anyone familiar with the casual sadism of recent entries in the Saw franchise will instantly recognise the doomed challenge of *Swarm*; flense away the sugary exterior and you'll find a caustic iron heart – a world ready to bludgeon the unsuspecting, allowing you mere seconds to sidestep oblivion.

You have 50 blue Swarmites to frantically herd through each level, rapidly collecting DNA to feed a central blob and maintain and increase your score multiplier. Although comprised of individuals, the swarm is controlled as one; you mould it like genetic putty, altering its shape to meet whatever murderous obstacle is in your path. While it initially resembles the strategic herding of *Pikmin*, *Swarm* is far less cerebral, more race for survival than measured exploration.

Only by amassing a high enough score can you progress to the next stage, and losing your multiplier will often force a restart. As your multiplier slips through your fingers, the temptation is to push blindly onward and pile further misery upon your minions. This is both *Swarm*'s cleverest and most frustrating conceit: plunging your hand into the unknown is exhilarating, but rarely do you have time to analyse what's ahead, waiting for you in the darkness. The game's challenges aren't signposted well enough to be avoided the first time, and it becomes more like racing blind. Until you're familiar with the track, there's a limited chance that you'll succeed first time – or indeed the third or fourth time, given the surgically sharp learning curve. The fact that your swarm is largely expendable provides little relief.

Although your flock can be respawned at various nodes that pulsate throughout each stage, you'll need to keep most of them alive to activate the higher multipliers. For a game drenched in blue blood, the end of each level can seem completely unwelcome if your score isn't high enough, and unless you're prepared to repeatedly rerun this slapstick gauntlet, *Swarm* will provide a stern test of both skill and patience. **[6]**

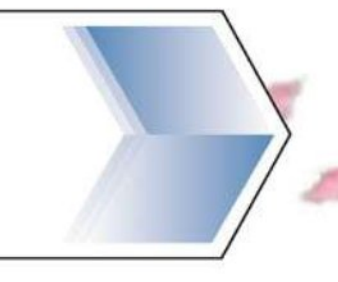

The gaggle of Swarmites doesn't have a leader, and its behaviour is based on the game's AI designer's PhD research into artificial life



TIME EXTEND

FINAL FANTASY VIII

FORMAT: **PLAYSTATION**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **1999**



With its grandiose set-pieces, archetypal characters and indelible sense of place, one of the most often maligned entries in the Final Fantasy series deserves another visit

Square Enix's *Final Fantasy* franchise has gone through three distinct phases since it debuted on the NES in 1987. The first six entries helped to ingrain the conventions of JRPGs for western gamers, and introduced the mythology and mechanics – from chocobos and moogles to summoning and airship travel – that bind all of the discrete stories together. *FFVII* through *X-2* shifted focus to prerendered 3D environments, dazzling cinematic interludes, involved minigames, and darker sci-fi themes. The third phase, which began with *XI*, entered the MMORPG space.

Upon its 1999 release, *Final Fantasy VIII* performed well critically and commercially, but the series-changing (and, for many gamers, life-changing) *VII* was a tough act to follow. As a result, time has not been especially kind to *VIII*'s reputation. The standard line on the trio of PlayStation games is that *VII* is the godhead, *IX* the neglected gem, and *VIII* the red-headed stepchild. In 2011 they're all still a lot of fun, but while *VII* probably isn't as good as you remember, *VIII* might just be better.

Not that it's immune to the franchise's more dubious idiosyncrasies. Like its predecessor, it has an opaque storyline

There is a training facility that anyone can wander into and get devoured by a T-rex. And when you start down the main path, things get really strange

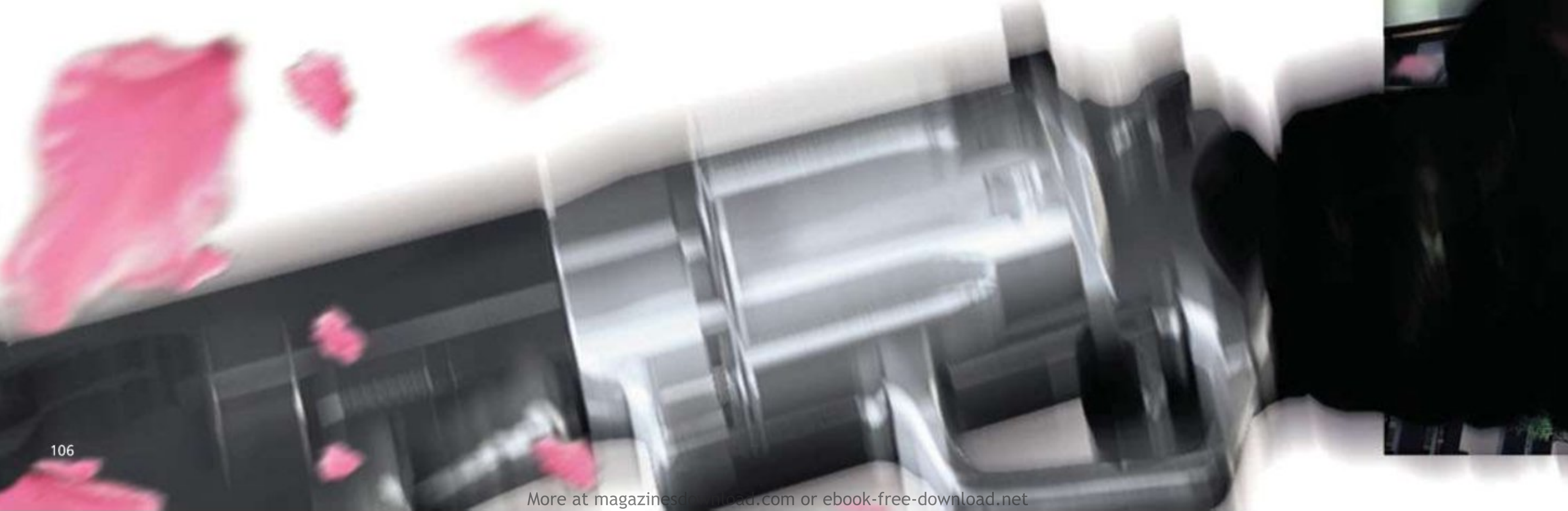
Players weaned on the first phase and alienated by the third likely felt a pang of nostalgia playing *IX*'s Tetra Master card game when it was repackaged for online multiplayer with *XI*. It was a reminder of what many players cherished about second-wave *Final Fantasy* at the precise moment that it was coming to an end. Another simple yet deep card game, Triple Triad, appeared in *Final Fantasy VIII*. Older fans could once again blow a Sunday afternoon trying to win Seifer's card from the owlish Headmaster Cid, in his office high atop Balamb Garden, where sails hang motionlessly against a painted sky.

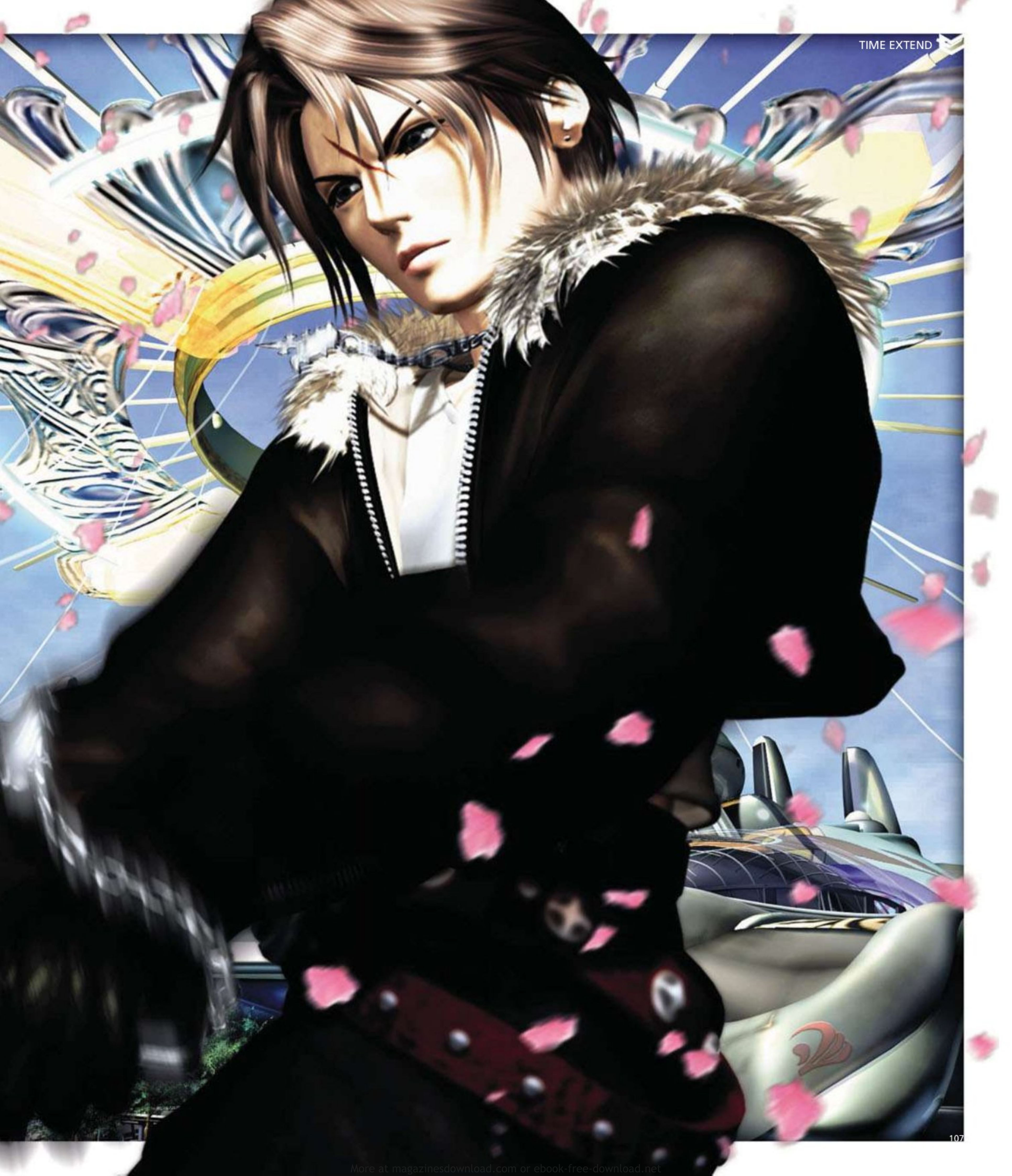
that revolves around a group of young people thrown pell-mell into the intrigues of vast geopolitical forces – a marauding regime, an organised resistance, and an evil sorceress. The action opens at Balamb Garden, an academy run by a mercenary organisation called SeeD, which trains insecure teenagers to fight and hires them out to paramilitary groups who want to overthrow the government.

You can go to the Fire Cavern for your SeeD exam right away, but you might enjoy wandering around the Garden first. Its long looping halls and flying walkways are laid out over circular canals, with lush greenery nestled in a *Phantasy Star*-style architecture of moulded metal. There is some kind of festival being planned. There are inklings of a subplot about a hotdog shortage in the school cafeteria. There is a training facility – a synthetic jungle – that anyone can wander into and get devoured by a T-rex. And when you start down the main path, things get really strange.

When the students aren't busy cutting, shooting and burning human soldiers and mythical beasts, they sit around and talk, a lot. The rampant killing they've been doing seldom seems to concern them; instead, they grumble about schoolyard issues of social acceptance, even after they begin to collectively black out and dream of a trio of mysterious (and player-controlled) soldiers, for reasons that remain mystifying for a long time. It's a faintly ridiculous and incomprehensible blend of Star Wars, Dawson's Creek and David Lynch's Lost Highway.

The most controversial thing about *VIII* was a new gameplay mechanic that jettisoned the usual magic points in favour of a system where spells are 'drawn' from monsters, to be cast immediately or hoarded. Spells can also be 'junctioned' to boost player stats in proportion to how many are stocked – but only if you have a properly trained Guardian Force equipped. It's an ingeniously layered system that allows for customisation beyond traditional







In a forest glade, Squall and Quistis stock up on Thunder spells courtesy of a sticky-web-spinning enemy, a Caterchipillar, which is how they spend a large portion of the game. The rare Depixelate spell still slips through their fingers, however

magic types, though it can get tedious: minor battles last forever because you want to draw a few more of those rare Double spells. But you do it. You do it to make your team strong.

Who are they? At the very start, we know little. Zell has a foul-mouthed attitude, a Limit Break that recalls the combo inputs of *Xenogears*, a tribal face tattoo and a love of hotdogs. Schoolgirl Selphie has a bob hairstyle like Nancy Sinatra and a giant pair of nunchaku. Rinoa is the raven-haired love interest with doubts about her revolutionary bona fides. "We're serious," she says, defending her cell's commitment. "So serious… it hurts." Quistis is nerdy-hot in a proto-Bayonetta way. Her use of a whip underscores her cute dominatrix style.

Squall is so taciturn and keeps his redeeming qualities so hidden that you wonder what people see in him. "You're the best looking guy here" is the first thing Rinoa ever says to him, sashaying into a party in a tiny white dress. "Dance with me?" He doesn't answer, but then finally admits he can't dance. She sweeps him on to the floor for a ballroom cutscene to rival Beauty and the Beast. They almost kiss as fireworks blossom over the domed skylight. Then Squall goes to mope on a magnificent balcony. Quistis appears, seeming vaguely jealous. Alarmingly, she invites Squall to the 'secret place' where students go to 'talk' after curfew. But it turns out that she just wants some consoling conversation after getting demoted from instructor. "Are you done yet?" Squall asks after she spills her guts. The franchise is built upon ambitious narratives, but you don't come to *Final Fantasy* games for story and characterisation. What the series does best is pure atmosphere – beautiful worlds and archetypal characters, with an epic sense of scale and amazing set-pieces, on to which players can project their imaginations, like all the best bright plastic things of childhood.

You don't come to Final Fantasy games for story and characterisation. What the series does best is beautiful worlds and archetypal characters

And then there's Squall, our hero and Quistis' student, with whom she flirts scandalously. This must owe to his looks – it can't be his personality. Squall wears a black leather jacket with a fur collar. You can tell he's special because he has a white streak in his floppy brown hair, which makes him look like the star of a '90s teen sitcom, maybe Boy Meets World. He's portrayed as an odd mixture of cool and vulnerable, stoic and tormented. Like sullen teens everywhere, he speaks begrudgingly, and his interior monologue verges on nihilism in its ambivalence. His rival Seifer is his mirror image; they give each other oppositely slanted but equally handsome facial scars in the game's intro. Seifer's lack of existential angst – his unshakeable self-confidence – marks him as a villain in the *Final Fantasy* universe. His favourite insult is "chicken-wuss".

This was before the homogeny of the modern graphics wars, however, so *Final Fantasy VIII* relied on the ingenuity of its art designers to create painterly prerendered backdrops that conveyed a unique sense of place. And while the persisting vogue is for the grimmest environments imaginable, *Final Fantasy* is about visiting places you'd love to see in real life – idyllic seashores and eerie moonscapes, winding cliffs and

IN THE CARDS

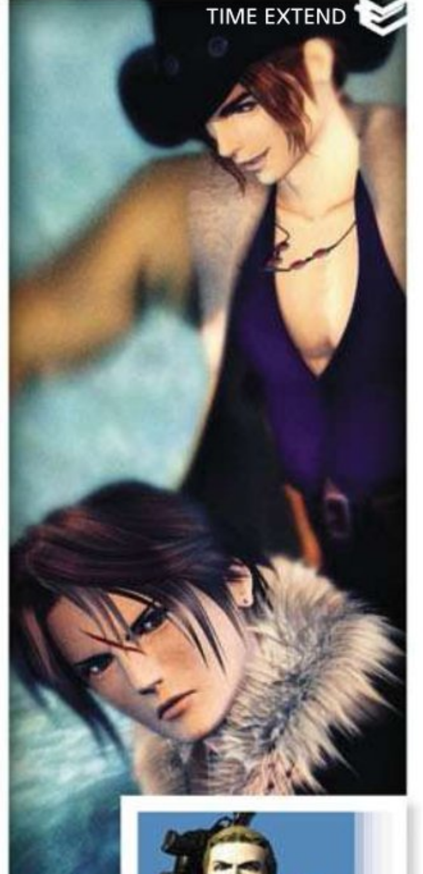
Throughout the game, you can challenge NPCs to hands of Triple Triad, which blends Pokémon-like collection with strategic complexity. Each card features a monster or character, with a numerical value on each side representing its strength. From a preselected hand of five cards, players take turns placing them on a 3x3 grid. Where edges meet, the highest number prevails, flipping the loser's card to the winner's colour. The game is deepened by the elemental properties of some tiles, and by regional rules that allow for combos, winner-takes-all games, and direct swaps. In a neat emergent-gameplay twist, you can spread rules from one region to another, though woe betide you if you accidentally spread the dreaded Random rule, which prevents you from picking your best cards.





At the beginning of the game, hero Squall has the option to choose to help Selphie plan the Garden Festival or not, a decision that will affect your relationship later. Right: Selphie shows off her 'Saucy Wink' and 'Use GHDs' special abilities





vibrant cities packed with the minutiae of everyday life.

Rent a room in the Balamb Hotel, and you awake in a chamber made of seashells, in every shade from blue to green, to the sound of gulls calling outside the window. There's no reason for it to be so entrancing, nothing you can really do there, and no guarantee that the player will even see it – its sole function is to delight. The camera is beholden to the artistry, shifting around to shoot every scene from its best angle, which can wreak havoc with the controls. In rooms with an isometric perspective, the directional commands seem randomised on insanely skewed axes. But it's worth it.

This is a highly baroque world, where every surface is crammed with pattern upon elaborate pattern. The cities blend the grandeur of historical antiquity with the exciting gaudiness of tourists traps – in other words, they feel like great modern cities. A single one might be an architectural hodgepodge of Victorian England, modern Tokyo and ancient Rome. It's not just the fabulous buildings that captivate, but the ground-level ornaments: the flowering bushes and cobbled streets, the flags and banners, the window boxes and wrought-iron gates, the gas-lamps and neon signs; each lovingly imagined and uniquely rendered.

Yet it still conveys a full sense of being a place where people live, and their untold stories are far more enticing than the game's plot. One house in Balamb resembles a holiday beach but with a claw-like contraption dangling inexplicably into a cauldron in its centre. What could be happening here? You make up your own story as Renaissance light through the window fades across the geometrically patterned floor.

As always, the music and cutscenes are outstanding. The Balamb theme, a liquid synthetic guitar arpeggio, is especially bewitching. This is also the *Final Fantasy* game that tries the hardest to make its cutscenes interactive. The sting is taken off the long summon animations by the boost command, a timed button-mashing game that raises your damage. And at times – such as the great train-hijacking set-piece – the graphics switch over to movie quality, but you can still make your jagged-edged avatar run around within it. You can't do much, but this violation of the cutscene's traditional separation from gameplay is thrilling.

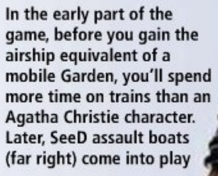
In some ways, *Final Fantasy VIII* is conservative. It has latent traces of point-and-click adventures: puzzles aside, just figuring out which environmental detail you can interact with to make something happen is part of the challenge. In many other ways, it was forward-looking, predicting modern moral choice in a rudimentary way: if you help some children being menaced by soldiers, Squall somersaults in like Errol Flynn, gunblade ringing out heroically. Then he scurries around the edges of the screen, hunting the hidden portal to the next grand vista.

This feeling of taking an action-packed holiday in a gorgeous, heterogeneous and hermetic world – dreamed up for your solitary enjoyment – is what made second-wave *Final Fantasy* so special, and it has been diluted as the franchise has tried to keep up with MMORPGs. *XII* and *XIII* made some gestures to placate old fans, but they were half measures. Walking around *FFXII*'s world of ghostly dummy-NPCs offered constant reminders of the gameworld's permeability. Meanwhile, XIII was crippled by rigid linearity. The franchise's struggles in the online sector make us wonder if other players feel the same way – that a *Final Fantasy* game without that paradoxical blend of openness and intimacy isn't a real *Final Fantasy* game. If Square Enix were to revisit the highly controlled and private worlds of its flagship's peak, perhaps alongside its online venture, it might well discover a grateful market there.



WORKING FOR A LIVING

Axing MP wasn't the only big change *FFVIII* made to the standard formula. Instead of getting Gil (currency) from defeated monsters, your party receives a salary from the academy, which increases as your rank improves. During certain missions, factors such as conduct, attitude and speed affect your pay. You can also raise your rank by passing multiple choice tests under the Tutorial menu. This system can mess with the game's economy – with a crib sheet, you can blow through all the tests and start stacking fat sacks of Gil from the outset. But no one's *making* you cheat.



In the early part of the game, before you gain the airship equivalent of a mobile Garden, you'll spend more time on trains than an Agatha Christie character. Later, SeeD assault boats (far right) come into play









THE MAKING OF...
TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL

Ubisoft's crack stealth team creeps out of the shadows to talk weapons, dynamic lighting and how art can inform gameplay

FORMAT: **GC, PC, PS2, XBOX** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** ORIGIN: **CANADA** RELEASE: **2002**

If you worked at Ubisoft on the *Splinter Cell* or *Rainbow Six* franchises in the autumn of 2000, sooner or later you'd have a heavy weapon shoved into your hands. As the company expanded its Tom Clancy connection, after acquiring the bestselling author's multimedia outfit Red Storm Entertainment that August, the Montreal offices were frequently invaded by men carrying scary armaments.

It was a dangerous time. Consultants demonstrated taser guns in conference suites. Dev teams were bussed out to the training ground of the local police force's Tactical Response Group, where heavily armed cops schooled them in how to handle Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine guns and sniper rifles.

Mathieu Ferland, senior producer on *Splinter Cell*, remembers the boot camp training well: "There were guys out on the field crying after being teargassed. One of the programmers on *Rainbow Six* ended up with huge bruises on the shoulder and arm after shooting a 12-gauge shotgun and experiencing the recoil. It was a fun day."

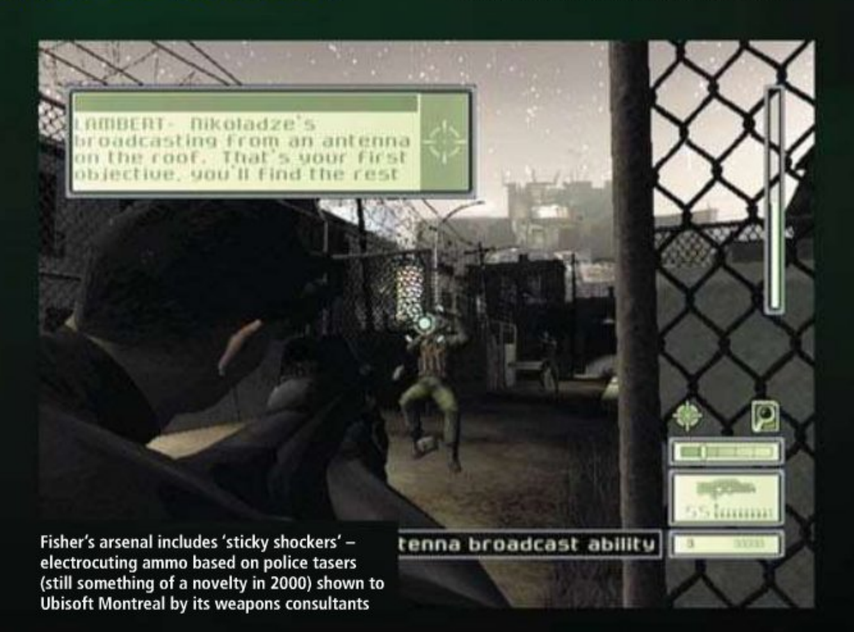
For Ferland's team, tasked with creating a new stealth IP that would slot in to Ubisoft's Tom Clancy branding, the experience was invaluable. "It's all about the Clancy approach," says Ferland. "Even though he wasn't involved in this development directly, the Clancy universe was a very, very important guideline for us. Each decision we were making was: 'Is it Clancy? Does it feel serious, realistic, not too futuristic?'"

While *Rainbow Six*, with its squad-based, tactical approach, was typical of most Clancy games, *Splinter Cell* strove to be different. Evolving out of a bottom-up development process and styled as a thirdperson hide-and-sneak game, it was a daring attempt to redefine stealth action. No one knew it at the time, but it would turn into one of the most iconic franchises in modern gaming.

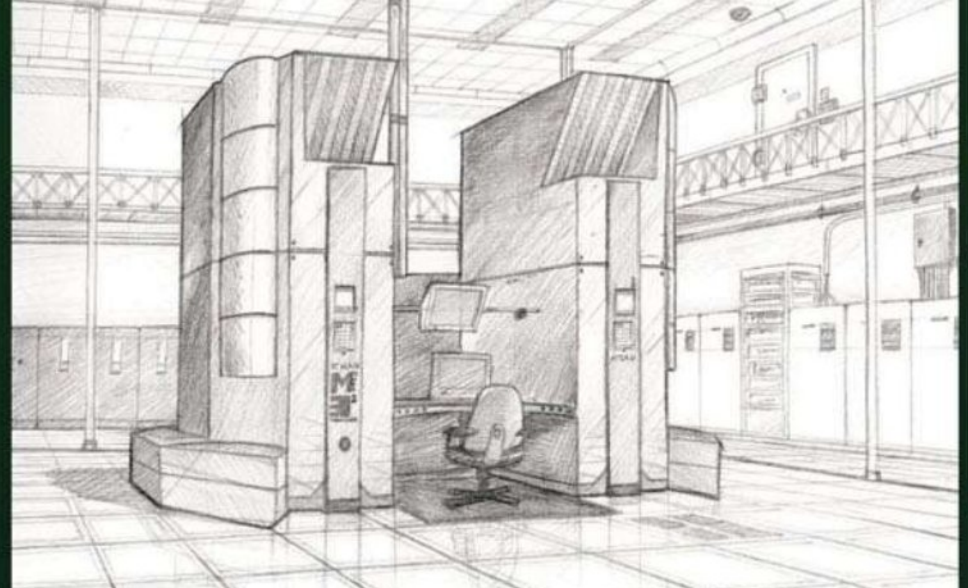
Few games are as lonely as *Splinter Cell*. Wandering in and out of the shadows, hunched over in a back-breaking crouch-walk, Sam Fisher is a man who has no need of friends or family. Support is limited to a few voices in his earpiece; discovery will lead to being disavowed. He's a man alone, an assassin who emerges from the darkness to take down his prey with extreme, silent, prejudice.

Offering players control of this wetwork specialist, seconded to the NSA's 'Third Echelon' division, *Splinter Cell* set out to reward slowness and caution. It rationed the action to make you appreciate the skill required in its execution.

"It's all about the Clancy approach... Each decision we made was: 'Is it Clancy? Does it feel serious, realistic, not too futuristic?'"



Fisher's arsenal includes 'sticky shockers' – electrocuting ammo based on police tasers (still something of a novelty in 2000) shown to Ubisoft Montreal by its weapons consultants







Splinter Cell keeps its backdrops varied. Its roster includes Chinese restaurants (above), foreign embassies and even a break-in at the computer room of CIA HQ in Langley, Virginia



SPLIT DECISIONS

Somewhat surprisingly, in light of Ubisoft's fondness for motion capture, Sam Fisher's sneak-and-creep was created using custom animations. "Several of Sam's moves weren't humanly possible," admits Ferland. "If you've ever tried to do a crouch-walk you'll know it's back-breaking, but we wanted to use it as it shows his cautiousness."

Another contentious move was the split-jump, a late addition to the game after one of Ubisoft's marketing artists drew it for a magazine cover. Convinced it was too cool not to include, it was quickly shoehorned in to the proceedings. "It wasn't very well integrated," the producer confesses, "and there were only a dozen places to use it in the game." Still, on the odd occasion it did come into play, it became the perfect signature move: "It's iconic because it shows you mastering space. The people underneath you don't even know you're there."

"The curve of starting from being hidden, moving to a tactical mindset and then going through a high peak of action, a quick win and a release of stress right afterwards is a loop that works very well in a short amount of gameplay," says Ferland. "In a minute you can experience this, then come back to a slow-paced area and be very satisfied with what you've just done as a predator."

That freedom was something that emerged from the development team's earliest prototypes, which showcased the detection and AI systems and let you interact with them: hiding, being discovered, hiding again. "Because of the systems we were implementing, the player felt they had more flexibility, more things to do, more ways to navigate and globally much more freedom," explains the producer.

Flexibility of choice was pivotal. True, *Splinter Cell* always funnelled the player towards a clear goal – like infiltrating an embassy or terminating a target. But it was the array of macro-decisions that made the sneak-and-creep gameplay loop feel as though it offered a wider matrix of possibilities.

Each scenario necessitated choices: do you take out the guard with your silenced P90? Throw a bottle to distract him? Or climb the wall and sneak across a ledge?

responsible-ises the player." That sense of responsibility feeds directly into the game's tone, giving it a murky moral sensibility.

Voiced by gravel-gargling actor Michael Ironside, Sam Fisher is a veteran who knows that spying is the second oldest profession in the world, and about as honourable as the first. Snapping necks and pistol-whipping enemies in this game leaves you feeling more morally compromised than the run-and-gun amnesiac adrenalin

"We produced some very nice textures. Then, when we created the lighting, they were put in dark zones and you couldn't see them!"

While the game didn't always respond to such experimentation kindly – the punishing trial-and-error difficulty is arguably its greatest weakness – it rarely refused it. Indeed, it was central to *Splinter Cell*'s design.

"In most games you walk around a corner and there's five guys already running to their scripted cover points and the only thing you're going to do is shoot them," reflects *Splinter Cell* game designer **Clint Hocking**. "You can do it with a grenade or your sidearm but you can't *not* kill them. A game like *Call Of Duty* makes that decision for you every time."

Playing as Sam Fisher, however, is supposed to offer something very different. "In *Splinter Cell* you can come in this room from the windows or the door or from the skylight," Hocking continues. "You can sneak past these guys; you can take them out hand-to-hand; you can do all kinds of different things. It really behoves you to make that decision as opposed to having the game make that decision for you. It kind of

charge of, say, a firstperson shooter. Rarely does killing someone seem like something to celebrate; after all, every time you kill a guard instead of sneaking past them you compromise your hard-won invisibility.

Light and darkness: these are the essential ingredients of moral ambiguity. They're also the key to *Splinter Cell*'s greatest asset, its dynamic lighting. Originally designed to be an Xbox-exclusive title, the game set out to use the console's processing power combined with Epic's Unreal Engine to create a breathtaking chiaroscuro effect, in which regions of light and shadow collide to dramatic visual effect.

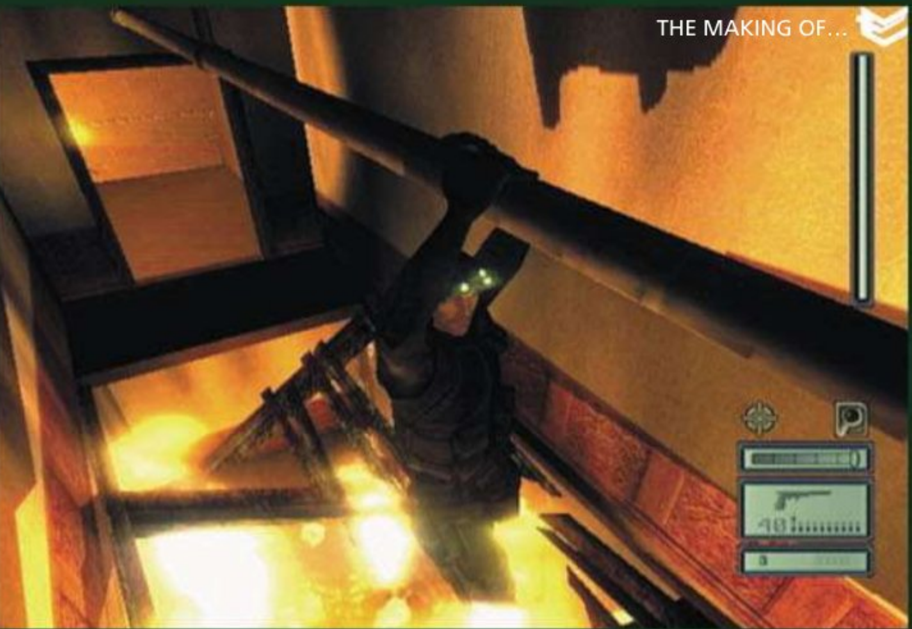
It wasn't an easy task, according to art director **Hugo Dallaire**: "Since the gameplay was about hiding in the shadows, it was clear we needed to work on a new lighting system to make the game possible. I remember Antoine Dodens, the lead engineer, telling me about this technique called dynamic lighting. He said they



Solitude and slow pacing are key to *Splinter Cell's* feel. Ferland says the dev team knew it had created something different when their wives and girlfriends started giving them advice from the sofa whenever they played early builds at home











Crouching, creeping or crawling, Sam Fisher is a physically imposing presence. It's delightfully counter-intuitive that players spend most of the game trying to keep his power in check, sneaking past oblivious guards, before letting loose on a target

were implementing it in the engine. Most people were sceptical that this powerful system could run in realtime, including me. Even Antoine admitted to me later that he had doubts too." Concerns continued to be voiced until two weeks before deadline: "The framerate was in terrible shape due to those realtime lights, but we found many optimisations to make it more acceptable."

Bathing the screen in inky blackness caused its own problems. It ran counter to the conventional navigation paradigm of moving towards the light, and keeping Fisher visible to players demanded a series of compromises: at times NPCs seemed myopic, at other moments the protagonist's glowing green trifocal night-vision goggles cut through the dark like Christmas tree lights.

The biggest issues came as the team dealt with the unexpected consequences of having so much darkness onscreen. "There were a lot of tough calls for art direction, because we spent a lot of time and effort producing some very nice textures," laughs Ferland. "Then, when we created the lighting, they were put in dark zones and you couldn't see them any more!"

From a level designer's point of view it was an exhilarating, frustrating, process. *Splinter Cell* forged a heightened understanding of how animation, art and audio feed into gameplay itself. Ubisoft's later games – from *Assassin's Creed* to *Far Cry 2* and *Splinter Cell: Conviction* – would all reap the benefits of lessons learned from this more integrated approach. When the original game became an overnight hit – "I remember seeing numbers that were higher than *Halo* and it was like: 'Uh, OK…'" laughs Hocking – and launched a lucrative franchise, it was obvious that the approach had more than a few merits.

"*Splinter Cell* was special," Dallaire says. "It was the only game I've worked on where the first pass of lighting was done by a level designer. They were placing red emergency lights everywhere! Then, when art tried to make the map look good, we destroyed some of the gameplay. As you can imagine, there was a lot of compromise from both sides."

Hocking, who had first-hand experience of that while working on the level design, agrees: "The real challenge of level design in *Splinter Cell* was figuring out how to work with art. As soon as lights can be switched on and off and can cause the player to be detected or provide places for him to hide, then suddenly how the level is lit is more important to the level designer than it is to the artist."

It had unexpected ramifications not just for level design but for the entire team. "People in other disciplines like animation and art and sound started to understand the gameplay repercussions of what they were doing," Hocking explains. "They become designers as well as implanters of art. That's the really important synergy that came out of – and for the most part was *born* – in that studio on the *Splinter Cell* project." Almost a decade on, it's that, perhaps more than anything else, that has ensured that *Splinter Cell* still casts a long shadow.



SAM VS SNAKE

Two stealth games featuring veteran heroes, alarm systems and AI guards: it's inevitable that many players would compare *Splinter Cell* with *Metal Gear Solid*. "We've always shown a great deal of respect to *Metal Gear*," says Ferland, "but the two games are very different. We're much more gameplay orientated, while *Metal Gear* had a lot of great cinematics for the fans to dig into the story. *Splinter Cell* was more of a big playground where you could stop anywhere and play with the systems. It was more of a free experience. *Metal Gear* had more narrative drive. It dragged you into the story and tried to make you do what the game wanted you to do. The two games had very different philosophies behind them but there's no right or wrong approach."

Regular expressions

Image Metrics' latest app is an about face in more ways than one

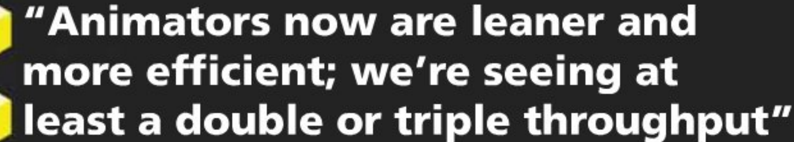


Peter Busch, senior technical producer, Image Metrics

For Hollywood it's about fantasy, giving a character like Dren, the sex-shifting amphibian in Vincenzo Natali's 2009 film Splice, the emotions to hold her own against human co-stars. For games it's about reality, assuring the player that *Red Dead Redemption*'s John Marston is a man of steely convictions, not fuzzy pixels. Both roads have led to Image Metrics, the Manchester-born facial animation expert known for its markerless capture solution Faceware. The message at this year's GDC: now you don't have to go anywhere, Faceware can come to you.

Developed over the past eight years, Faceware has previously been a service rather than a product. Though the technology was licensed (with much fanfare) to Bungie in 2010, the launch of Faceware 3.0 is the wider animation community's first chance to download it as an app and try it for free. That done, it runs independently of the company's servers in the UK and its other base in Santa Monica. "That's a fundamental change for our company," notes **Peter Busch**, senior technical producer. It's one that has demanded major changes to more than just software.

Image Metrics has learned pretty much all it needs to know about doing things in-house – training new animators, making good facial rigs and ensuring successful capture in diverse conditions. Enough, certainly, to recognise widespread mistakes in game industry workflows. "We see the same ones

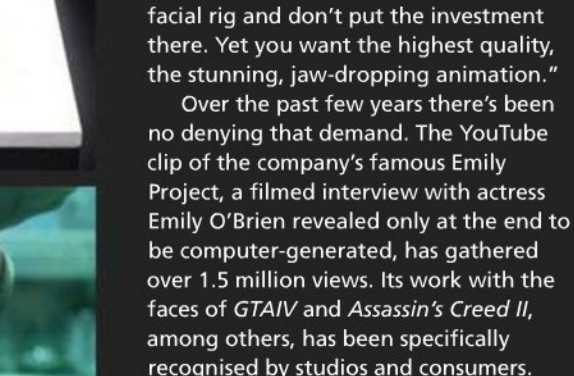


"Animators now are leaner and more efficient; we're seeing at least a double or triple throughput"

repeated over and over again," says Busch. "You don't direct your actors, you bring in [the wrong kind of director] to direct your talent, or you have a sub-par facial rig and don't put the investment there. Yet you want the highest quality, the stunning, jaw-dropping animation."

Over the past few years there's been no denying that demand. The YouTube clip of the company's famous Emily Project, a filmed interview with actress Emily O'Brien revealed only at the end to be computer-generated, has gathered over 1.5 million views. Its work with the faces of *GTAIV* and *Assassin's Creed II*, among others, has been specifically recognised by studios and consumers. All this, adds Busch, in a 'cutthroat and competitive' industry.

"The exciting thing," he says, "is that you see a technology that comes out, like MotionScan in *LA Noire*, and it pushes the focus that face is important. When you watch your cutscenes you're watching your characters, not the





Movies like Splice (above) have been a small part of Image Metrics' work, but that might change. "I think we have a much better offering to the film space," says Busch



A plugin for Max or Maya, Faceware offers the flexibility needed to appeal to studios running complex and established pipelines

background and how great the lighting is on the wall; you're looking at the eyes. In the last six to eight months you're seeing a renewed interest in people investing in their characters, and that's really what our offer speaks to. But until we really build a market here and build the fact that face is important – it's your brand, your characters, your franchise – it's going to take a while for everyone to get up to speed."

For the Faceware package itself – with which just two animators, says Busch, put together the Emily clip in just two weeks – this year's mantra is a change from 'prosumer to consumer', recognising the needs of clients who'll deal primarily with the app. "A tool like this could spread like wildfire – that's the encouraging thing," says Busch. "But we want people to be using the tool effectively and have a positive experience. Otherwise, what's the point? We have our new forums that we launched on our website, we'll be doing a weekly webinar, outreach, whatever we can to educate users on the best practices. But my core belief is that the software sells itself."

In Faceware 3.0, the most consumer-friendly features are the biggest: Auto Pose and Shared Pose. The first uses the technology's detailed analysis of the filmed performance to recommend the most extreme frames to the animator, giving them those vital starting points almost instantly. "A huge benefit of ours is that an animator defines the relationship of the actor to the character," says Busch. "We can leverage the analysis to tell the animators which frames to pose to create the best relationship based simply on the pixel information. So what we're seeing just internally is that animators now are leaner and more efficient; we're seeing at least a double or triple throughput because they're setting fewer poses to get the better result."

Shared Pose, meanwhile, is a project-wide library of approved poses which stores video and rig control data, working with Auto Pose to quicken workflow and improve consistency. "If you have a team of people working on one character, the challenge is to make it look like it was produced by one animator," says Busch. "What Faceware allows you to do is leverage those same poses over and over again using the exact same controls on the rig. So as the project goes along and you have to do 20, 30, 100 minutes of facial animation for one character, you're leveraging the same 100 poses or whatever that number ends up being.

"The great thing that we're seeing from the combination of Shared Pose and Auto Pose is that halfway through production, when a new animator starts a new shot, they have all these shared poses. And when they say, 'Give me five Auto Poses', it uses the control values of all those shared poses to create them. So essentially you can get a result in a matter or two or three button clicks. You're able to iterate in near-realtime, and have results in a matter of minutes."

For *NBA2K11*, Image Metrics used NBA footage to match faces to body animations. Players, coaches and assistant coaches can all be animated to the same level of quality

As a service provider, Image Metrics provided 335 minutes of animation for *Red Dead Redemption*, using 101 bespoke rigs and covering over 100 in-game characters



Maketh the man

Image Metrics' acquisition of avatar creation specialist Big Stage hints at a widening of its performance focus, Big Stage's Portable You software using photos of a subject to create a 3D body model. But what's the application? "The sheer amount of usage you have there in the consumer market has really expanded the company as a whole," says Busch. "It's actually quite an undertaking to see what we're going to do with this: virtual worlds, chat forums, social networks, etc. We create animation but we've never really had the presence of avatar creation. And, essentially, it's a very similar approach because it takes just a few still images and you're able to make your own avatar, so you can see where the cross-pollination is between the two technologies."

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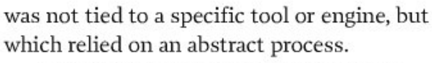
Part three: On design as law

BY CLINT HOCKING

There is a philosophy of game development that seems to resurface from time to time which asserts the idea that 'design is law'. Back in 1996 when John Romero first founded Ion Storm in Dallas, design-as-law may have been an idea that needed its time in the spotlight to help us grapple with dramatic shifts taking place in the industry.

As team sizes grew and the weight of triple-A game engine tools sucked the generalist developers of previous decades into potential wells of increasing specialisation, the role of 'designer' became harder and harder to define. In parallel, the foundational works of design formalism such as Church's essay Formal Abstract Design Tools (bit.ly/2xwQWF), and Hunicke, Leblanc and Zubek's paper on The MDA Framework (PDF: bit.ly/hUoqMn) helped define the designer as someone whose work was not tied to a specific tool or engine, but which relied on an abstract process.

> The job of designers is neither to separate good ideas from poor ones, nor to control whose ideas make it into the game



Unfortunately, the slow (and in many contexts necessary) decoupling of designers from code or from implementation tools has led to an increasingly frequent misinterpretation, misuse and abuse of the idea that 'design is law' that at best reveals a wrong-headed development philosophy and at worst undermines our understanding of what games are, and what they can be. I don't really feel a need to speak about whether design was, or ought to have been, law at Ion Storm Dallas in 1996, but it's clear that in 2011 design is not, nor should it be, the guiding light of game development.

Before debunking it, though, let's first ask ourselves what the statement 'design is law' means, because it can mean a couple of different things.

First, it can be interpreted to mean that designers or design departments are the 'custodians of vision' on a game project – that they are the final arbiters of what gets in the game, and how it should work, look and/or feel.

Second, it can be interpreted to mean that design itself is the end objective of game development; that what we are creating is first and foremost 'a design', and all of the work that goes into making a game should be in service of the beauty and artfulness of the design itself.

Neither of these things are true, at least not in the context of the part of the game industry that I work in, where games are a collaborative effort put together by teams of people and intended to be played by players looking to entertain themselves or enrich their lives.

The first interpretation is dangerous because it too often leads to design protectionism and to 'creative siloing' – especially in larger and/or less experienced development teams. While it is often true that the person specifically tasked with being custodian of the overall creative vision of the project is a designer or comes from a strong design background, it is divisive to imply that that elevates their decisions to the level of 'law'.

The notion that 'design is law' in this sense arises from insecurity on the part of designers who are afraid that if they are not the ones whose ideas are making it into the game, then there is no justification for their jobs. The problem with this thinking is that design is not about 'generating ideas good enough to make it into the game'. Most ideas are bad, and the job of designers is neither to separate good ideas from poor ones, nor to control whose ideas make it into the game. The job of designers is to master the art and craft of iterating forward on relevant and potentially good ideas to the point at which they can be properly evaluated for inclusion in the creative whole. In this sense, design is not law, but rather, design is the courts whose job is to evaluate conformity with a set of principles.

The second interpretation is dangerous because it is self-indulgent. Design in the arts (in general – but perhaps particularly so in the case of game design) is unique in that it is a user-centric art. Painting or sculpture in service of its own artfulness is a stylistic concern. Post-modern era literature is often knowingly self-aware and self-indulgent. Music that is overwrought can be classified stylistically as Baroque. Conversely, the chef who values the artfulness and expressiveness of the act of cooking over the taste of the final meal is not considered to be making artistic statements – he's considered to be a bad cook. It doesn't matter how beautiful and elegant his work is in the kitchen if what ends up on the plate tastes awful.

It's the same with design. Design that values the design itself over its object – in our case the player – is poor design. In this sense, if design is the courts, then the player is the jury. And to extend the metaphor to its logical conclusion, I think the idea we need to embrace is that play is law.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com

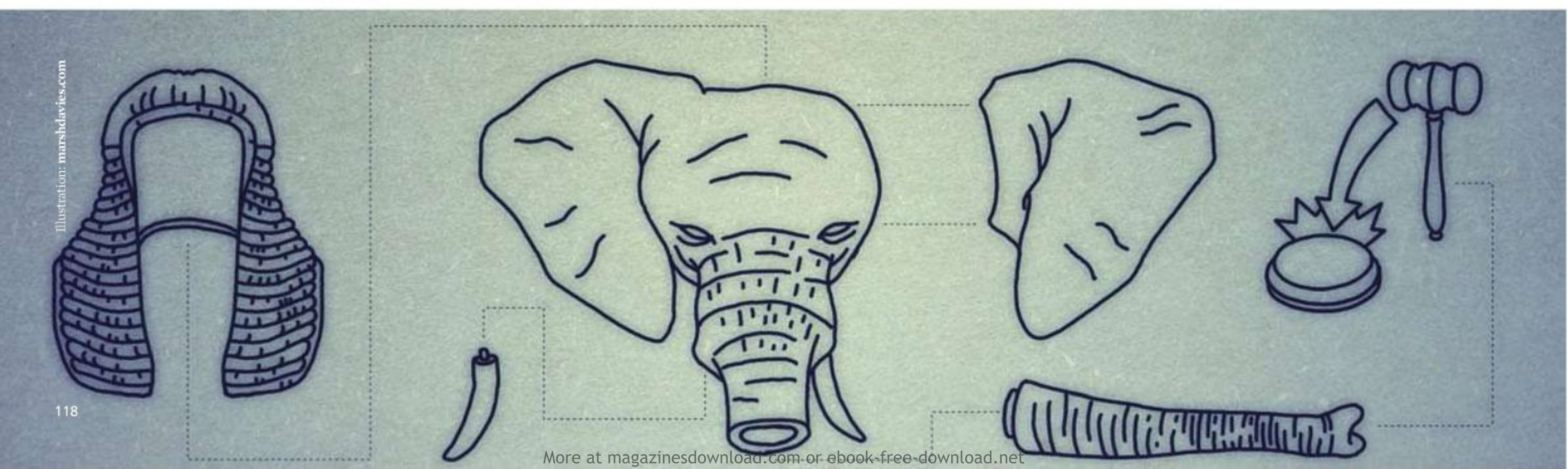


Illustration: marshdavies.com

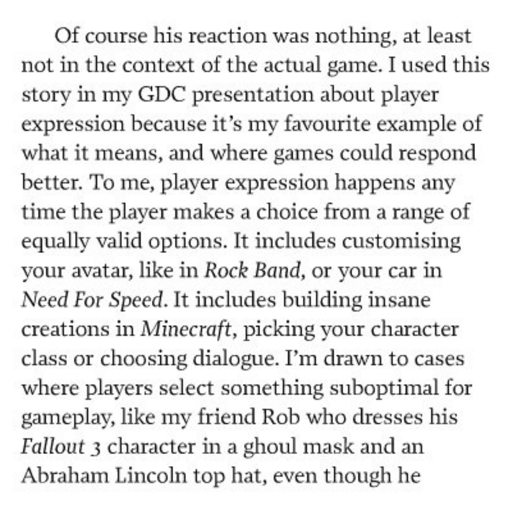

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HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

Why it's hard to pay attention

BY RANDY SMITH

As the first of the entire series, it was a boilerplate mission. Break into the manor of Lord Bafford, steal his jewelled sceptre, and sneak back out. Yet this one *Thief* particular player approached it with a unique flair. One by one, he hunted down each of Bafford's hired guards, smacked them with the blackjack, and dragged their unconscious bodies into the dining room where he arranged them in colourful poses: propped up back to back, legs poking out from the dumbwaiter, or draped across the length of the dinner table. Then he collected every available wine bottle and tossed them haphazardly in with the comatose crowd. Here was the perfect crime. When the Lord returned home, he'd find his precious treasure missing and his security staff in severe disarray after what was evidently a night of debauchery while the boss was away. What would his reaction be?



> I'm drawn to cases where players select something suboptimal, like my friend Rob who dresses his Fallout 3 character in a top hat

Of course his reaction was nothing, at least not in the context of the actual game. I used this story in my GDC presentation about player expression because it's my favourite example of what it means, and where games could respond better. To me, player expression happens any time the player makes a choice from a range of equally valid options. It includes customising your avatar, like in *Rock Band*, or your car in *Need For Speed*. It includes building insane creations in *Minecraft*, picking your character class or choosing dialogue. I'm drawn to cases where players select something suboptimal for gameplay, like my friend Rob who dresses his *Fallout 3* character in a ghoul mask and an Abraham Lincoln top hat, even though he could be wearing a combat helmet. And I love the Bafford example because players weren't even prompted toward that type of expression in *Thief*. This player took it upon himself to craft a perfectly appropriate continuation of the narrative using the tools available.

So what should we, the designers of that game, have done? Should the player have received a special mission debriefing describing how Bafford had fired all of his guards in a fit of rage? Let's talk code for a second: would that even be possible to detect? That exact instance, sure, but what if the player had missed a few wine bottles, or only knocked out two guards? What if the player had posed them scandalously in the boudoir instead? Or hung all of Bafford's unmentionables in a hallway where guards patrol? Could you detect those cases, and any others the player might invent? The problem is the semantic meaning carried by the objects in question: guards, wine, dining rooms and lacy undergarments all mean something specific in the context of a secure manor when the owner is away for the evening. This is more meaning than game code has historically responded to, but that's what makes it an exciting area for innovation. The sound effects in *Thief* were tagged with semantic data relevant to stealth: how suspicious they were, or whether they could plausibly have been generated by a nearby ally, general information the AI could reason with categorically. You could imagine extending this approach so the game knows about what behaviour is appropriate for guards, or what makes Bafford angry, or what combinations of things and places are especially perverted. This is clearly a lot of risky R&D effort for something explicitly off the path of expected gameplay.

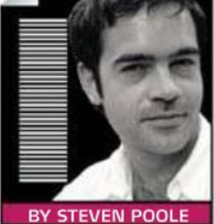
And anyway, is a custom debriefing really what the player wants? It reminds me of an Achievement, a hypothetical 'Made It Look Like The Guards Got Drunk' Achievement. And the problem with Achievements in cases like this is that when the player feels imaginative, you show them that you already thought of the clever thing they did. That crushing disappointment of being just another sheep in the herd is the bad part, but the good part is the little thrill you first feel when you realise the game has noticed and acknowledged you. Which implies the crux of the challenge: respond to the player's expressions without invalidating their sense of ownership. Stats maybe work better, like *GTA*'s 'Fires Extinguished' or 'Longest Flight in Dodo', which serve as yardsticks the player can use to measure accomplishments of their own invention. If you had the tech that could notice the Bafford case, you could respond not with a debriefing but with a new stat: 'Guards Fired'. Maybe then the player would feel noticed and also intrigued. How can you max that out?

The problem can be simplified by shifting to a context with less semantic meaning, such as a cave on Mars filled with unearthly lifeforms, which describes Tiger Style's in-progress project. Whether the player is able to share their amazing discoveries with humanity depends on which objects they are able to bring where, and most combinations aren't meaningful and therefore don't have to be supported. I hope this turns out to be interesting, but like the 'Guards Fired' stat, it's far from a perfect design. Maybe it's at least a step into uncharted space where games work differently to collaborate with their players.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch



Illustration: marshdavies.com


BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

Metal Gear Snoozing

Most mornings these days, I am woken up by the main title theme from *Metal Gear Solid 2*. This has major benefits for a chronically reluctant riser. The beginning of the music, all blippy whooshes and mysterious cello stabs, evokes the feeling that today is going to be yet another exciting action-thriller adventure. By the time the last reprise of Tappy Iwase's magnificent theme is going, all heroic choirs and sawing violin counterfigures in Harry Gregson-Williams's expertly Hollywoodesque arrangement, I am pointing in the air with one hand while tapping at my phone's screen with the other, woozily attempting to solve the mental arithmetic problems that are the only way to make my alarm clock app shut up.

When I played through *MGS4*, I kept hoping, all the way through, that this theme would finally, triumphantly, reappear. It never did. Only afterwards did I discover that Konami decided not to use it, owing to accusations of 'plagiarism'. Tappy Iwase's theme, some people had said, must have been stolen from a song called The Winter Road by the Russian composer Georgy Vasilevich Sviridov, which allegedly was all but identical. I compared the pieces myself, and I can report that my informed musicological conclusion is: bullshit. Yet because of some morons, I was denied my aural fix.

Why do I care? Well, because this music means just as much to me as most pop music. It instantly evokes a time in my life, and the batty pleasure of the games. Other videogame scores, too, have a similar evocative effect: the bleepy euphoria of *Turrican 2* on the Atari ST, or the smooth-driving jazz-rock of *Ridge Racer Type 4*. When I saw the boat-race sequence in The Social Network and heard Trent Reznor's frantic arrangement of In the Hall of the Mountain King, I instantly thought: '*Manic Miner*!'

To those of us who play games, videogame music can come to be as important as any other kind of music. And the increasing appreciation of the work videogame composers do, with the addition, for example, of an Ivor Novello Award category, is belated justice. But as game music gains mainstream recognition, it is also grappling with new problems.

> "The increasing appreciation of the work game composers do, with the addition of an Ivor Novello Award category, is belated justice"

Bleep Bleep Bloop, Paul Bennun's excellent Radio 4 documentary about videogame music, was a celebration of the art's history but also a thoughtful discussion of its challenges. **Joris de Man**, the composer for *Killzone 3*, described one difficulty eloquently. When you're writing music that is going to accompany gameplay, he said, you write little eight- or 12-bar layers that can be mixed algorithmically by the music engine according to the intensity of onscreen action. But, he explained: "Within those eight or 12 bars you have to be careful not to put in too much melody, because as they're being shifted around – like the different intensities are being kind of randomised while you're playing the game – you never know how the melody's going to resolve, whereas obviously when you're composing a linear piece, which a cutscene or a piece of film is, you know from start to finish what's going to happen."

So that is why we now get so many games with big orchestral set-pieces over titles and cutscenes, and millions of near-indistinguishable rent-an-ambience loops during gametime. (To be fair, of course, this is how the music goes in the *MGS* games as well.) Can you conjure up an aural memory of any in-game music you've heard recently? I find it difficult.

Several people in the documentary complained that too much videogame title music, meanwhile, was now going all out for symphonic bombast, in a kind of film-score envy. I think that is right, but I think an equal-and-opposite problem is one of enforced heterogeneity. Big games are now set in so many different kinds of environment or alternate between so many different aesthetic styles that the composer is obliged to provide what essentially amounts to a compilation of expert pastiches, with no single overall character. *LittleBigPlanet 2*'s music is often very clever and cute, but it's like a box of a hundred different sweets. What does it taste like, overall? Search me.

In the 8- and 16bit days it was enough to write an iconic theme and a few variations. But modern gameplayers will no longer accept the kind of grating monothematic earworm that is the soundtrack to *Tetris* or *Jet Set Willy*. On the other hand, an excess of stylistic variety becomes anonymous, and a smorgasbord of more-or-less-atonal percussive loops is just boring. Today's game composers, then, have one of the toughest creative roles in the industry. When they do something beautiful – as, for example, with Hideki Sakamoto's gorgeous, genre-bending score for *Echochrome* – their work is as important, and as deserving of celebration, as any other kind of music. Now excuse me while I go and make the horns again for Tappy.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net


Illustration: **marshdavies.com**

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

Letting go of ownership

BY N'GAI CROAL

If someone had told me a decade ago that I would prefer digital media – downloads or streams – to physical media, I'd have said they were crazy. After all, I didn't have broadband in my Brooklyn apartment, just at the office. My Palm VII wireless handheld and my SkyTel two-way pager were the pinnacle of technology. And I still fancied myself a proud collector of CDs, DVDs, books, comics and games. US retail outlets like Borders, Barnes & Noble, Tower Records and Virgin Megastore were urban oases where one could walk in with no particular purchase intent and walk out with bagfuls of stuff. At times, it would get so bad that my circle of friends would compare notes to see who had the most as-yet-unviewed DVDs or CDs, still in their original shrink wrap.

Today, it's an entirely different story. Buying digital singles and albums via Amazon and artists' sites? Check. Movie and TV subscriptions by way of Netflix and Hulu Plus? Check. Books for Kindle? Comic books through ComiXology for my iPad? Buying console and PC games for download? Check, check and check. So how did I stop being the guy who told all of his friends, "Don't buy music on iTunes – get the CD, rip it and put it in storage as your backup"? Now I buy apps and other digital goods without a care in the world and own just 50 Blu-ray discs – most of them promotional copies that were sent to me when I was still a full-time journalist – with no plans to acquire any more if I can help it.

Part of it is that the infrastructure is in place to make all of this possible: fast bandwidth into the home; upgraded phone networks that can handle streaming and downloads on the go; online storefronts that make finding and purchasing content relatively quick and painless. Part of it is the convenience and instant gratification that comes from reading about something that you might want to have, and being able to view it seconds or minutes later. Part of it is that there's nothing like a small New York apartment to convince someone that forgoing the physical for the digital can only be a good thing.

> There's nothing like a small New York apartment to convince someone that forgoing physical for digital can only be a good thing

Some of the changes are also specific to me, though I suspect many of you will be able to relate. Even before I left Newsweek and began travelling all over North America and around the world to visit my clients' offices, I finally admitted to myself that I was no longer a collector. My comics weren't an 'investment' any more than my DVDs, and since I was just reading them once or twice before stacking them in piles around my apartment, I'd be better off treating them like magazines and throwing them out after I'd finished reading them. Now, for someone who'd been collecting comics from the age of ten, it wasn't easy to let go. But let go I did, and damned if I didn't feel freer because of it.

Walking away from DVD and Blu-ray was a bit tougher, mainly because, even with my glasses, I can tell the difference between the relatively low levels of compression of video on a Blu-ray disc versus the much higher levels of compression on an HD stream. But when you're constantly on the road and your laptop doesn't have a Blu-ray player, streaming works just fine. And by using services like Netflix and Hulu Plus, I don't have to figure out how to navigate a friend's cable box or interfere with his or her DVR recording schedule. All I have to do is get on their Wi-Fi, and all the stuff I want to watch is queued up and ready to go.

So for lifestyle reasons, I've increasingly given up on the concept of owning content. Subscriptions and licences are the order of the day, which I wouldn't have seen myself doing ten years ago. I know that it upsets brick and mortar retailers, but I can't wait for more console games to be released for download at the same time as their disc-based counterparts, rather than months later, if at all. Yet at the same time, there's part of me that wonders whether we – and the people who have ushered us into this digital utopia – have fully reckoned with the implications of this new lifestyle.

Whether it's a forum ban resulting in a player getting locked out from playing his copy of a singleplayer game, or digital downloads being tied to a particular device rather than a user account, there are not-so-subtle hints that while a lot of thought has gone into the convenience of acquiring content, less thought has been put into the convenience of how that content is handled after the purchase. For example, many of us have made an investment in downloadable games and expansions for our current consoles, with a reasonable expectation of backwards compatibility. But when the next generation of platforms ships, are we going to be able to transfer our games and continue to play them? How long should a publisher keep the servers up and running for a game that requires them? Because even though we as consumers don't have the same rights of ownership we once did, that doesn't mean that there isn't a right way to manage our ownership-free future.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com

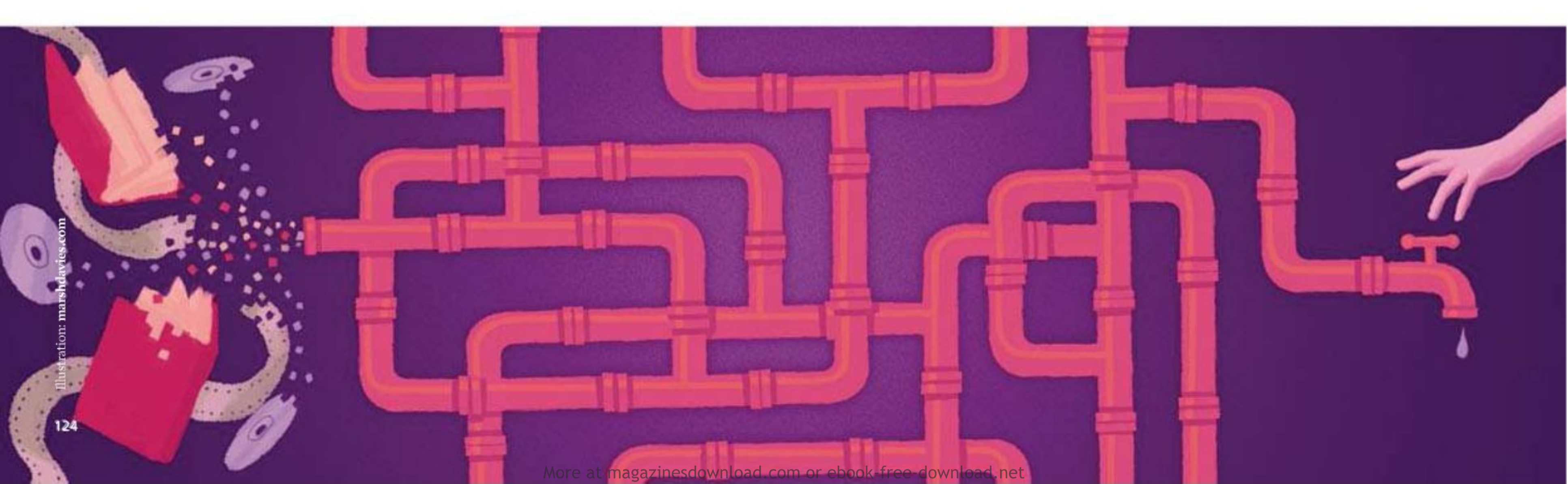


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The Nordic Game 2011 conference, 10-12 May 2011 in Malmö, Sweden, will continue its focus on bridging gaps within the industry, and this year's edition will use creativity and entrepreneurship as the point of departure. With the belief that insights drive innovation, the main mission of the Nordic Game 2011 conference is to give attendees the opportunity to think outside the box, by listening and talking to people who do exactly that.

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inbox



Issue 226

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum
forums.next-gen.biz

Topic: Overpowered powers
So what stuff have you seen in games which completely chucks the balance of the game? Like a super weapon, or a combination of powers or a character type or something.
mistercrayon

The 'super' grav gun in *Half-Life 2*. Once you get it you are basically invincible. Valve cleverly limits its use though so it's a clever all-powerful moment in the game without being game-breaking.
wonderbanana

Sagat.
Woodimari

Game-breaking move? Hideo Kojima putting Meryl's codec frequency on the back of the game case when you only had a rental copy.
owwmykneecap

The recent gameplay trailers for *Battlefield 3* sent me straight to Games On Demand (an expensive option, yes, but I'd rather DICE saw some of the money) to download *Bad Company 2*. Having missed it the first time round and now wide-eyed with anticipation following the footage of its newly announced cousin online, I was hoping for an enjoyable and easily digestible FPS romp washed down with some pleasing visuals. And, of course, that's exactly what I got. But despite the Frostbite engine's evident achievements, what struck me most about the game was the quality of the inter-squad banter.

While *Uncharted* and *Red Dead Redemption* presented similarly entertaining exchanges, they predominantly stuck to plot exposition or lightweight quips. What made *Bad Company*'s conversations stand out was their amusing irrelevance to the situation at hand – not only did they give glimpses of the characters' lives away from the battlefield, but also lent credibility to the camaraderie the squad exhibited under fire. Sarge's explanation to Haggard that the reason "the black man" pronounces 50 Cent as Fiddy Cent is down to "expeditiousness", or the theological debate that concludes with an apology over the theft of some moisturiser, are so enjoyable I regularly stayed in place, happy to let each sequence play out.

No doubt such peripheral touches are resource-hungry endeavours, but the sense of immersion they provide – blurring the line between the gameworld you inhabit and the fiction beyond – is a valuable commodity that I wish more developers would pay greater attention to. I was, however, encouraged to read in your preview of *Portal 2* in **E**225 that Stephen Merchant was allowed to rant for minutes at a time during the recording sessions for Wheatley. Paying attention to elements like this further bolsters the padding between the player and the imaginative space outside the designer's world, and that can only be a good thing.
Marcus Wheeler

What made Bad Company's conversations stand out was their amusing irrelevance to the situation. They lent credibility to the squad's camaraderie

Please help me understand something I find completely baffling. When I first discovered that triple-A titles were making it on to the new wave of tablets – such as *Dead Space 2* on the iPad – I felt very much like Tom Hanks' character in the boardroom scene of the film Big.

Tom Hanks has a peer who is pitching his new product in a toy company boardroom. The toy is a very dull piece of humanoid plastic which transforms at the user's behest into a skyscraper. Hanks' character is a child in a man's body who has landed a role at the toy company as a top executive; dumbfounded, he sits back and can only offer an "I don't get it".

Why would the gaming industry pander to the second coming of the tablet by shoehorning games such as *Dead Space* on to the platform? How is there even a market for this?

After over three decades of the ergonomic evolution of control mechanisms, why would we welcome touchscreens into gaming? It's not just the awkward interface of holding a delicate slab of electronics, pushing virtual buttons in place of actual purpose-built ones, it's the fact that with every interaction I'm having to obscure my window into the game's world with my hands!

Am I the only one who feels this way? Am I just a misguided fool who refuses to accept progress and new ways of stimulation?
Jacob Hylton

For fast-paced action games we'll always take the pad option, but have you tried playing *Plants Vs Zombies HD*? Don't rule out the potential of a touchscreen's direct control.



Letter of the month wins a DSi XL

Something terrible happened to me recently, something that shook me to my very foundation. Now don't get me wrong, I love gaming, and I see myself as proficient at it. I have completed the original *Modern Warfare* on Veteran, I completed the original NES *Super Mario 3*, I got 120 stars in *Mario 64*, and I got the complete set of platinum medals in *PGR*s *2* and *4*. In fact, there is no game that I have bought which I haven't completed. Yet something happened.

I was playing *Castlevania: Lords*



Of Shadow on my 360, and after being killed by a poxy spider for the umpteenth time on the third stage, I did something that I couldn't believe I would ever do. I put the difficulty setting on easy. I haven't played a game on easy, ever. I tried to reconcile this, saying it was a flaw in the game; they made it too hard, or they didn't QA it properly. Yet, deep down, I knew this wasn't the case. It was that my fingers weren't as fast as they used to be. It was that everything was too hectic on the screen.

In the olden days, I would have persevered, learned the ropes, died countless times. But now I just want the story, and the feeling of being superhuman. So I'm bashing through Lycans and making little goblins explode, but there is still a tiny bit of me that isn't enjoying as much, knowing that it's on easy.

I wonder if anyone has a remedy for the above? Or maybe it is just old age catching up with me.
Anand Modha

There's a difference between a well-thought-out challenge and a pure dexterity test. There's no shame in giving up on the latter – though the former is worth persevering with. We don't have a remedy for getting older, but if you want to improve your reaction times, we prescribe two doses of *Contra 4* and an hour of *Bangai-O Spirits* a day on your new DSi XL.

I am compelled to write in after reading Gillian Patterson's inaccurate mail and your response [**E**225] about so-called automated messages from *Hot Pursuit*'s Autolog.

I have never received an automated Autolog message outside of the game, and my friends and I play the game all the time! Anyone who actually plays the game could tell you Autolog is by definition a system for friends who are already playing *Hot Pursuit* with all automated messages being accessed in game on the wall. If Gillian is receiving messages in her inbox 'extolling the virtues of *NFS: Hot Pursuit* and inviting her to play the game' then these have been purposefully sent by her friends who think she may be missing out on the fun. I would suggest that Gillian lightens up a bit – after all, this is a friends list on a game console! Receiving messages from friends that tell her what they are currently enjoying should never be interpreted as a bad thing – unless you are either reclusive or don't like games.

Your initial assessment of Autolog being 'an innovation designed to be shamelessly cloned by the competition' shouldn't be worrying anyone who is at all interested in the future of social gaming.
DL

Gillian's objection was her lack of choice over receiving these formulaic invites in the first place. Friends lists already let us see what our acquaintances are up to. Perhaps a more comprehensive suite of privacy options would allow less socially inclined gamers to avoid the template-based invitations?

Compared to a grisly film like Saving Private Ryan, Bulletstorm's violence has all the realism of repeatedly punching a Bobo doll right in the face

I enjoyed your review of *Bulletstorm* in **E**226. I'd been curious to play it ever since reading the overcooked story on FoxNews.com back in early February, ranting about how it was going to singlehandedly turn a whole generation of children into rapists and murderers. Based on *Bulletstorm* gameplay I'd watched online, the collaboration between Epic Games and People Can Fly was clearly going to revel in dude-bro dick jokes, cleverly suggestive Achievement names and comically grotesque violence. Epic can't be accused of selling the game on any false pretences – what you leash toward you and boot into exposed live electrical wiring is what you get. Not exactly the sort of game you'd think of playing with your five-year-old daughter curled up in your lap before bedtime. But this game obviously wasn't made for – or marketed to – five-year-old girls, was it?

What I found interesting when I actually got a chance to play the game was how thoroughly inoffensive the whole affair turned out to be. Just because I've been alive more than 30 years doesn't mean my conscience has been completely paved over. I still recoil when I see images of real-world violence and even cringe when films portray it with a commitment to unflinching realism. But compared to a grisly film like Saving Private Ryan, which is based on a war that actually happened – and Fox would likely applaud for its portrayal of the wartime heroism of American soldiers – *Bulletstorm*'s violence has all the realism of somebody

Continued



Lords Of Shadow **– the game that finally broke Anand Modha, sending him into the arms of easy mode**



Topic: Geekery Confessions
I recently laid new laminate flooring in my games room, and I've been scouring the web for game related tat to make it look messy again. I've ordered a create-your-own welcome mat from Ebay which reads: WELCOME TO YOUR DOOM.
I'm also contemplating a Companion Cube plushie, and have only just been talked out of spending £86 on a set of four handmade *Super Meat Boy* cushions for the new sofa I haven't even bought yet.
What's the the most cringeworthy/awesome piece of gaming geekery you've ever purchased?
Moot_Geeza

Probably my Tournament Edition *Street Fighter IV* Arcade Stick. Which I was stopped with going through an airport once. Imagine the scenario that played out from there on in. Me on one side trying to explain what it was, and the middle-aged women working in airport security on the other, bamboozled to high heaven.
Speedhaak

My *Rez* Trance Vibrator always gets a raised eyebrow from people who haven't yet seen it, or know about it, and are greeted with the words 'TRANCE VIBRATOR' in orange when they decide to have a peek at my collection.
afgavinstan

Getting knitted Katamari hats for me and the missus off eBay, also painting the missus a pair of Katamari Nike Dunks was probably about as far as I'll go. I did make some Tron shoes this year but they aren't really game related.
Franjipane

I have never spent any money on anything videogame related that wasn't a videogame itself. I feel like I'm winning.
equinox_code

repeatedly punching an inflatable Bobo doll right in its grinning mug.

You can't decry a game's violence for being offensive without heeding its context. After all, *Super Mario Bros* shows violence toward winged turtles and no family-values watchdog organisations sounded any alarms. I'd argue that the silly-looking, shambling green mutants that you gleefully slaughter by the truckload in *Bulletstorm* are no less comic than Mario's Koopa foes. *Bulletstorm*'s vibrant colour palette – with its bright oranges and blues – further adds to the cartoon-ish unrealism of the experience.

The game is extremely pretty to look at. There were numerous moments where, between showdowns, I'd find myself serenely admiring the planetary surroundings like a tourist visiting a tropical island resort on holiday, happy as a lark. This is hardly the response of a person being beaten over the head with offensively violent imagery. It's as if Epic and People Can Fly intentionally created a fun, lively, beautiful environment to underline the surrealism of the whole experience. Only the most delusional individual would ever confuse the imaginary planet Stygia with anything resembling Earth or real life. And all the discussion of silly-looking exploding mutants completely obscures the fact that the game's story contains genuinely affecting moments of heroism, self-reflection, leadership and friendship. This story just happens to be wrapped in a layer of sticky, bubblegum violence. But I'd wager nobody at Fox will every play all the way through it to offer an informed opinion.
Sean Banfield



Topic: The Emotion Engine
What games have evoked emotions in you in a way that has enhanced your gaming experience?
Raiziel

While playing the very last mission of *Red Dead Redemption* I got a feeling of regret that it was all coming to an end. Not saying it was the best game ever but I really got into the actual world its set in. I was almost sad to leave it behind.
Red Dave

I think *DQIX* has a number of moments, what with it being about death and all. It's because they're not big dramatic moments, but kind of ordinary stories about how these little NPCs cope with death in various circumstances. A lot of it's about missed opportunity, regret, living up to a legacy, not appreciating the time you have with someone, that sort of thing.

And then all tied up nicely with the ultimate story about suffering worse than death. The fact your character comes to the human world as an outsider and an immortal, and even as the 'hero' you can't stop these things from happening, but just try to help in some small way makes a difference too.

I thought the immortal/death thing was done really well in *Lost Odyssey* as well, particularly through the memory stories you unlocked.
JB



***Bulletstorm* – not the sort of game, asserts Sean Banfield, to be played with a five-year-old girl**

Duke Nukem Forever's recently whipped up a storm of controversy with the reveal of its CTF mode in which you fight over and haul off a 'babe', chivvying her along with the occasional smack on the arse. Some have claimed misogyny while the devs have fallen back from 'it's harmless' to 'it's ironic'. Where will they beat a retreat to next?

But aside from the repulsive depiction of women as dumbly passive sex-puppets in this mode and the game at large, the argument around it highlights a problem with developer intention and the control of content after release. A game (or a film) is only ever as ironic as the audience is bright enough to realise. If Gearbox, or 3D Realms before them, was making a clever point about the hateful absurdity of '80s machismo, then you can bet a steroid-shrivelled testicle that the slavering, dough-faced peons who form the majority of the game-buying public won't get it.

For these gormless wretches, whose minds are so easily moulded by crude commercial messages and the clumsy sensationalism of the red tops, playing a game in which you are explicitly rewarded for treating a woman with all the respect you would afford a goddamn flag – only worse, since this is a flag you can sexually demean – allows them to normalise misogyny. Mass-media depiction and endorsement allows them think that this is all just a laugh and dismiss anyone who objects as some kind of man-hating lesbian-nun-Nazi.

I wouldn't mind the grubby adolescence of the *Duke Nukem* series if the game was palpably designed to criticise it, but it's not, either historically speaking or going from what we've seen of *Forever*. It wants to have its cake and eat it (though 'tart' is probably a more appropriate choice of confection). The only people who can control that message are the players, and given the teabagging, racism, sexism and general bilious atmosphere evident to anyone who's played online, you have to wonder if handing yet another tool of abuse to the masses is really anything other than collusion. The message from Gearbox seems clear: "Hail to the cavemen, baby".
Daniel Cousens

Unfortunately, at the time of going to press we haven't seen Gearbox's efforts in their full context, so we'll hold off on handing out any kind of final judgement. Whatever the case, however, you're right that what the development team intend is irrelevant to a large degree – interpretation (and exploitation) by the audience is ultimately the deciding factor. There's a good reason Bethesda wasn't willing to even give players the option to hurt children in *Fallout 3*, after all.

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